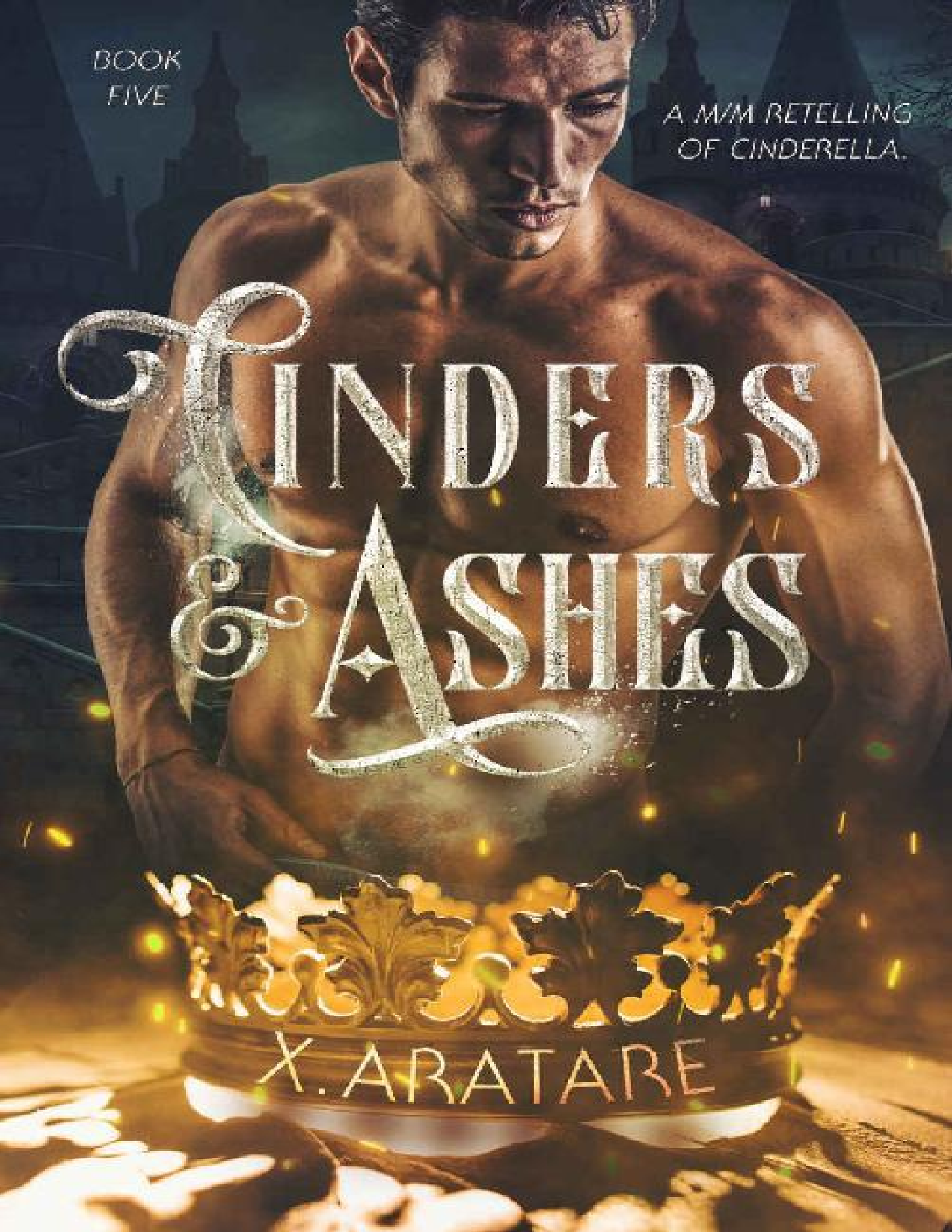
BOOK
FIVE
A M/M RETELLING
OF CINDERELLA.
CINDERS
& ASHES
X. ARATARE

CINDERS & ASHES

A GAY RETELLING OF CINDERELLA (BOOK 5)

X. ARATARE

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WHAT'S HAPPENED SO FAR?

In *Cinders & Ashes* Book 1, Finn Ashton is a servant on his own estate, serving the needs of his obnoxious stepfamily. His stepfather, Lord Gerard Steward, is desperate to gain social approval and marry his two sons, Christopher and Miles, off to nobility. But due to his being the son of a merchant, he is seen as a social climber and would be ignored except for the fact that Tanglewood Manor is the most fertile of any in the Kingdom of Rirea. That fertility is due to Finn's magical abilities.

Finn is a half-blood Fae. His mother was (mostly) human but his unknown father was Fae. Finn has no idea who his father is and claims not to care. But he did give Finn the ability to drain life, mix it with his magic and cause the estate to bloom. He has done this every year since his mother's death when he was 5 years old. The same death that revealed his magic and his Fae heritage. Since the deaths of the prior king and queen of Rirea, allegedly by the Fae King Thalanil Ravenspar's hands, all Fae found in Rirea have been put to death due to suspicions that they have loyalty to King Thalanil. Finn's stepfamily has agreed to keep his Fae blood secret in exchange for him serving them, making the estate bloom and never seeking the title of Lord of Tanglewood.

However, this year, there is so little life in Rirea that Finn is unable to honor his promise to make the estate fertile. Desperate for his stepfamily to keep his secret, Finn steals life from the Fae side of the Wall. The Wall is a magical structure that divides the human Kingdom of Rirea from the Fae Empire of the Eclipse Throne. It was erected right after the deaths of the human regents. Finn hopes this small amount of stolen life won't be noticed, but his hope is a vain one.

As a "reward" for making Tanglewood bloom, Finn's stepfamily gives him a half day off to spend mostly as he wishes. He goes into the Lupine Woods only to find a beautiful man being dragged by his horse and evidence that the Fae are aware of the stolen life.

Little does Finn know that the man he rescues is, in fact, Rohan De Clare, King of Rirea. Rohan has as many troubles as Finn. He knows that his kingdom is dying and suspects that the Wall is draining all the fertility from the soil and changing the normal animals into monsters. His uncle urges him to consider marrying one of the nearby kings or queens to provide Rirea some relief, but Rohan does not wish to surrender Rirea's independence, nor his *own*.

His uncle then suggests he instead have a meeting with all of the surrounding kingdoms, including

the war-like and dangerous Achuviel Kingdom and its King Tearlach. That suits Rohan better as, after a magical afternoon with Finn, he cannot imagine wanting anyone but the bewitching young man with the green eyes.

Confessing his love affair to the Captain of the Guard Leonid Blanchet and his noble companion Lord Serxio Lemos, the three of them head out into the Lupine Woods to the cabin where Finn and Rohan have agreed to meet again. The goal is to spruce up the hovel for a romantic picnic. But things do not go at all as planned.

For his part, Finn has found a new lease on life after his afternoon with the amazing Rohan, who he believes to be a simple noble lord and *not* the King of Rirea due to a misunderstanding and lie that Rohan builds upon. Finn's time is not his own as a servant, but he is determined to see Rohan again. His eldest stepbrother, Christopher, appears to intuit that something is going on with Finn. The two of them make a deal that Finn will help Christopher with his potions meant to restore Rirea's soil in exchange for keeping silent about whatever Finn's getting up to.

But, to Finn's dismay, the next day Christopher and Miles insist on coming into the woods with him to look for herbs for Christopher's experiments. Finn had hoped to grab the herbs and go to the cabin to meet Rohan, but now he is stuck with his stepbrothers.

As if things could not get more complicated for Rohan and Finn, the two parties meet each other in the woods. They must pretend not to know one another. Christopher, though, seems to recognize Rohan from somewhere. But before any secrets can get betrayed, a section of the Wall lowers and they all see the King of Wolves Tyreon looking at them. When Tyreon begins to move--a move that will lead to an attack in Rohan's eyes--Rohan draws his crossbow and fires, but Finn jumps between the bolt and the wolf, for Finn has dreamed of the great white wolf and knows he means no harm to them.

Finn is struck by the bolt. Tyreon drags Finn's unconscious body to the Fae side of the Wall. While Christopher and Miles run away, Rohan, Serxio and Leonid ride after Finn and Tyreon. While they manage to scare off the king of wolves, when they go to bring back a wounded Finn to the Rirean side of the Wall, they find that the Wall is once again intact and there is no way home.

In *Cinders & Ashes* Book 2, King Thalanil Ravenspar, the ruler of the Fae Empire of the Eclipse Throne, stands on one of Aymar's towers. He has sensed someone draining life from his land and worries that it is his elder brother Marikoth, a Death Mage, who was exiled from the Empire and has found a way around the Wall to strike at him. He had thought that Marikoth was killed by their father long ago, but he was not.

Like all Death Mages, Marikoth killed their mother, potentially accidentally, when he came into his power. This act made their father believe the prophecy that if a Death Mage is allowed to live they will bring about the end of the Empire. But, out of love, their father merely exiled Marikoth and now the danger he poses continues.

But even as Thalanil is haunted by his elder brother's continued existence, he is haunted more by

the love he lost. Maeve Ashton, Finn's mother, was the love of Thalanil's eternal life. She ended their relationship without any explanation. The last conversation they had was an argument about whether Death Mages should be killed simply based on a prophecy. Thalanil stated emphatically he would kill any son or daughter of his that showed the signs. Holding a hand against her stomach protectively, Maeve violently disagreed. And that was the last he saw of her.

Thalanil is left alone on the tower of Aymar with an exiled brother, a dead lover and no one and nothing to love.

Next, we turn to Rohan and Finn. These two lovers are separated. Finn's wound from the spelled silver bolt requires a Fae healer and Rohan is intent on finding one. The Wall remains in place and there is no sign of Tyreon, King of the Wolves, to take it down again. The only way to save Finn is on this side of the Wall. He and Serxio seek out a nearby village in the Empire, leaving Leonid to watch over an unconscious Finn. But Rohan and Serxio find more than what they bargained for!

The Fae village is surrounded by a magical fence and Battle Mages patrol the area, making it impossible for Rohan and Serxio to get inside. The need for the magical fence becomes apparent to both men as the forest is not only very alive, but antagonistic with vines constantly curling around ankles or wrists.

While they are trying to figure out how to get into the village and find a healer, a group of Fae and humans exit it. The humans are bound, wrists and ankles, with chains. They are led to a standing stone out in the forest, secured to it, and seemingly left there for some terrible fate. Rohan and Serxio decide that they must rescue these poor people. As Rohan is cutting through their chains with his magical sword, Lightbringer, something stirs in the forest.

Spiders.

Giant spiders.

Including one named Hex, which is so large as to more resemble an elephant in size than a spider at all. Rohan sends Serxio and one of the few freed humans, Thomas, to go back to the village and gain the help of Thomas' mistress, a Fae healer, for Finn while Rohan continues to free the chained humans and faces off with Hex. While Serxio reluctantly and Thomas eagerly run away, Rohan battles Hex. As he does so, Lightbringer's power seems to grow and change with Rohan feeling that he and the sword have become *one*.

Rohan is successful in his battle with Hex, but only one of the humans survives it, a woman named Emma. She had earlier warned him that Thomas "has no honor" and she is more than right. Thomas and Serxio return with Thomas' mistress, a Fae priestess named Ryleth, but Serxio is in chains and Ryleth, far from being pleased that Rohan has killed Hex, claims that he has sentenced everyone in her village to death. She sends a bolt of magic at Rohan, sending him into unconsciousness.

In the meantime, Finn is dreaming, but thinks he is awake. He is in the Lupine Woods. He is searching for Rohan and the cabin where they were to meet that day to have a picnic. But no matter which direction he goes, all he finds are more trees and no cabin. He feels feverish and weak, along

with occasional sharp pains in his side, as if he is suffering from a great illness. But has no recollection of being shot by Rohan or of the events that led to him being dragged into the Empire.

Eventually, Finn does find the cabin, but things are still strange. The woods around the cabin form an impenetrable wall as soon as he enters the clearing. The grass there is sweet and not poisoned. There are signs of occupation in the cabin, but Finn fears it is someone other than Rohan. His illness worsens.

But all seems to get better when Rohan emerges from the cabin, full of joy to see Finn. Yet, for a moment, Finn feels a sense of terrible danger even though this is Rohan who would never hurt him. He's coaxed into the cabin where mounds of furs and blankets await him along with a roaring fire and a feast fit for a king.

But the fire seems to give off no warmth at first, and, Rohan also seems oddly unconcerned with certain things like the fact that Tempest is not outside and the woods have formed an impenetrable barrier. But Finn believes that it is his illness making him imagine things, but he doesn't drink the wine that Rohan offers him…

He and Rohan begin to talk about magic where Finn learns about Death Magic and Death Mages for the first time. He is surprised and happy that Rohan seems to know so much. He has never dared speak of magic with anyone else for fear that they would guess he has Fae blood. But with Rohan those concerns are not there.

Yet the conversation takes an odd and terrible turn as Rohan begins to mock Finn for having small dreams. Wanting a bit of meat and a warm fire as his fantasy to be with Rohan, not even wishing to be at the man's estate, appears pathetic in Rohan's eyes. Finn then realizes that this is not Rohan at all. The being pretending to be his love is a Fae Death Mage called Marikoth.

Marikoth imprisons Finn as he tells Finn that he's dying and this is just a dream. The Fae Death Mage explains that he noticed Finn because Finn drained life from the Empire and he wants to know who he is and how much he knows about Death Magic. Marikoth reveals more than he finds out from Finn, because Finn knows nothing about his heredity or his magic. Marikoth is the exiled brother of King Thalanil Ravenspar who is intent on getting revenge on his family and taking the throne for himself. He reveals that Death Mages are only born from the Ravenspar line so Finn *must* be the son of Marikoth and Thalanil's father, or Thalanil, or perhaps even Marikoth himself. Horrified, Finn denies this even as he fears it is true.

But Finn's shock is cut off as he is suddenly sent into a vision. He is in Rohan's paralyzed body as Ryleth, her assistant Tela, her slave Thomas, and Serxio hawk over him. They are discussing Serxio and Rohan's fate. Hex, far from being a monster that they wanted destroyed, was a creature the Fae had made a deal with. In exchange for sacrifices, Hex and her children provided the Fae with a defense against other terrible creatures in the forest. Now, with the deal broken, Hex's children will attack the village so the Fae villagers must flee to the summer palace of Aymar.

Tela wants to simply kill Rohan and Serxio for their acts, but Ryleth sees Lightbringer. She

recognizes it as Vudine, the magical sword of House Aeturnal, the former Fae rulers of the Empire. Though Serxio tells her that Lightbringer has been in Rohan's family for ages, she believes he must have stolen it as he is human or, at least, *appears* to be so. But she decides that this is beyond her pay grade and Rohan's fate should be decided by King Thalanil himself. Ryleth also believes that King Thalanil must be told how bad the overgrowth is in the Empire, because their letters begging for help have not had any effect.

Finn is transported out of the vision. Finn realizes from his vision that Rohan is in danger and he must save him. He begs Marikoth to let him go and to even allow Finn to drain a little energy from Marikoth to save himself from death. Marikoth laughs at this.

While fascinated by this vision Finn experienced, Marikoth decides he is going to kill Finn by draining him anyway. Over Marikoth's shoulder, Finn sees a raven made of old feathers, bones and energy. This bird grows until it is a monstrous shadow while Marikoth, unaware, behaves like a drug addict at the thought of draining Finn's life.

Marikoth tries to kill Finn, but his powers don't work on Finn at all. Instead, Finn drains Marikoth. With this first taste of life, Finn almost loses control to the point that he almost kills Marikoth. But Marikoth manages to free himself. Just before he flees the death dream, he sees the massive magical raven and acts both afraid and betrayed at its appearance here before disappearing.

The raven leads Finn out of the death dream and Finn wakes up in the Empire. The life he stole from Marikoth and from the surrounding vegetation there heals his wounds. He has to lie to Leonid about how this happens, believing that Leonid would fear or hate him if he knew Finn had Fae blood, let alone was a Death Mage. He convinces Leonid that Serxio and Rohan are in trouble and they need to go find them.

Rohan wakes up in a cart, chained with Serxio and Emma, the human woman he saved from Hex. The whole village is traveling to Aymar. Ryleth has Lightbringer on her saddle. They intend to get to the village of Tradavor that night and rest before moving on. Rohan begs her to send someone back to get Finn, who is dying. He argues with her that her deal with Hex couldn't have continued indefinitely, because she would have run out of humans to sacrifice to it, and pleads for her not to let Finn die for his actions. Ryleth refuses to help him, because the spiders are coming and her people are her only concern.

The spiders harry them all the way to Tradavor. When they get to the village, the priest of Tradavor, Samron, refuses to let them in and traps them outside to be killed by the remaining spiders in order to save his own deal with the forest.

Rohan's connection to Lightbringer bursts into life and the sword flies to him. He finds himself repeating an ancient mantra that indicates he is the heir to House Aeturnal. He uses the magic within himself, with Lightbringer as a focus, to kill all of the spiders while sparing all of the Fae. The Fae, Ryleth especially, recognize that Rohan is a fated ruler of the Empire. They are welcomed into Tradavor because of this.

The magical raven that only Finn can see leads him and Leonid to the abandoned village where an Ostil, an enraged tree creature, has entered the space. Leonid tells Finn to run while he sacrifices himself to it so that one of them can get to Rohan and Serxio. Finn determines to use his magic. The raven starts to speak to Finn, urging him to kill the Ostil, but Finn refuses, instead communicating with the enraged creature and convincing it to let them go. Leonid realizes that Finn is magical. He is not afraid but grateful.

Rohan awakes in Tradavor, completely exhausted by the use of his magic, and unable to even stand. He is intent on saving Finn. He makes a deal with Ryleth that he will protect her people on the way to Aymar if she sends someone to bring Finn here and heals him. She agrees and Tela and Serxio are sent to look for Leonid and Finn.

Finn and Leonid hide when Tela and Serxio appear on the road, not realizing who they are at first. Finn uses his Death Magic to paralyze Tela while they greet Serxio. Tela realizes that Finn is a Death Mage at that moment. Assured she is not an enemy, Finn releases Tela and the four of them go back to Tradavor and Finn is reunited with Rohan.

Finn finally tells Rohan the truth about his Fae heritage and his Death Magic. Rohan completely accepts him. They realize that their magic works together. Finn drains life to feed it to Rohan. Rohan has the Aeturnal ability to imbue weapons, jewelry and buildings with enchantments, storing raw magical power within them. They see the possibility of draining the excess life from the Empire and using it to restore the life in Rirea. But that will only work if King Thalanil agrees. Rohan thinks it won't be safe to meet King Thalanil at Aymar, but, instead, to leave a letter with Ryleth to send to him after they figure out a way to get back to Rirea.

They make their way along the road to Aymar, but the forest is aggressive and blocks their path. Finn drains the excess life from the questing, invasive vines, but he takes too much inside himself and fails to feed the excess energy to Rohan. He releases the energy, carving a massive canyon into the forest. Those that didn't realize he was a Death Mage, do now. Only Ryleth is pleased by this development.

It turns out that Ryleth used to be the head of her order, but her belief that the Aeturnals and Death Mages are necessary to control the overgrowth in the Empire was considered heretical and she was stripped of her titles and sent to the tiny village as punishment. She gives Finn translated pages about a love story between the two last Aeturnal and Death Mage couples. She urges him to understand that he and Rohan are meant to be and that their abilities can save both the Empire and Rirea.

Just as they are about to enter Aymar, they discover that Emma has been murdered by Thomas. She found out that Thomas and Tela intended to out Rohan and Finn to Ryleth's old order. They killed her to stop her from telling Rohan and Finn their plan. Ryleth, Rohan, Finn, Serxio and Leonid chase Tela and Thomas into Aymar, but end up splitting up, with Finn going after Tyreon.

Tyreon leads Finn to King Thalanil. Thalanil recognizes Finn as the one that drained life from his Empire and a Death Mage. He alleges that Finn is a killer. Finn claims not, but then Thalanil reveals

that every Death Mage kills their mother upon entering into his power. Finn realizes then that he killed his own mother. Her wasting disease wasn't a disease at all, but was caused by him draining her.

Thalanil is about to kill Finn when he sees Finn's eyes and sees that they are the same as Maeve Ashton's, the woman he loved. This leads to the revelation that Finn is his son and that the reason Maeve ended their relationship was because she feared Thalanil would kill him, because she knew he would be a Death Mage.

Instead of wanting to kill Finn, Thalanil agrees to spare Rohan, Serxio and Leonid's lives if Finn will remain with him in Aymar. The Fae king then demonstrates his great power by sending Rohan, Serxio and Leonid through a magical portal back to Rirea. He promises Rohan that if Rohan ever sets foot in the Empire again, he will be killed.

In *Cinders & Ashes* Book 3, the story begins in Rirea with Marikoth saving a young farm boy, Jeremy, from two neighborhood thugs who have ill intent towards him and his sister, Hannah. But just when Jeremy thinks he's been saved, it turns out that Marikoth is a more deadly monster. It is clear that Marikoth is walking free in the Lupine Woods and doing whatever he wants.

Finn and Rohan are separated by the Wall and their duties, though both long for each other and vow to find a way to be together. Finn and his father, King Thalanil, bond over their mutual love of wyverns and flying. They begin to learn about one another, as people as well as father and son, and discover there is a lot to enjoy about one another. But there are two points upon which they violently disagree.

The first point is about Finn's Death Magic. Finn begs his father to help him learn how to control it and use it for good. Thalanil believes that Finn can simply never use it and, instead, learn traditional magic. Finn wants to believe that's true, but, in his heart, he senses it isn't. But Thalanil will not be moved. Finn is determined to find Ryleth and ask her to teach him.

The second point is about Rohan. Finn insists that Rohan is not only an honorable man and great king, but that Finn loves him and all of Rirea. He wants to be by Rohan's side. And he desires his father to help heal Rirea's dying land, which may require dealing with Marikoth, who lurks somewhere beyond the Wall.

Thalanil believes that he is saving Finn from heartbreak by not allowing him to hold onto things outside of the immortal lands. While Rohan *might* have enough Aeturnal blood in him to be immortal, he might not. Watching Rohan wither and die will be agonizing, not to mention all the mortals that Finn has known up to that point. Better to stay behind the Wall and outlast them and Marikoth. Further, his father reveals that Marikoth, not Thalanil, killed Rohan's parents. They had made a deal with Marikoth to help him overthrow Thalanil, but had repented at the last moment and Marikoth had killed them due to their betrayal. The meeting on the cliffs was to warn Thalanil about his brother's continued existence, but it ended in their deaths, Thalanil's near escape from Marikoth, and the raising of the Wall to keep Marikoth out.

But the raven leads Finn to a Luminus, a magical communication device that Finn recognizes as a

twin to one his mother had in Rirea. His father confesses that he and Finn's mother communicated over the Luminus, which syncs time between the two lands when someone is within the Luminus' orbit. But he forbids Finn from using it to contact Rohan or his friends in Rirea. But Finn is not to be deterred. He realizes that the paired Luminus is in Miles' bedroom and if he could but convince one of his stepbrothers to take the Luminus to Rohan, he could speak to the Rirean king! And he does just that!

He secretly speaks to both his stepbrothers over the Luminus and discovers some very distressing things. First, his family and the servants all thought Finn was dead. The servants, Magna, Emmott and Jacob left Tanglewood when his stepfather refused to allow them to have a funeral. In order to punish Christopher for "losing" Finn out in the Lupine Woods, his stepfather has turned Christopher into the family scapegoat and slave. Gerard has sold or destroyed all of Christopher's alchemical equipment, is starving and beating Christopher, and has retreated into drinking heavily every day.

Finn convinces his stepbrothers to load the Luminus into a cart and take it to Reave Castle and King Rohan. He explains that his stepbrothers will be safe from Gerard there. Christopher eagerly agrees, but Miles only does so when Finn lies that he'll come back to the Manor and serve them. In the end though, Christopher is the only one to take the Luminus and escape Tanglewood while Miles retreats back to Gerard in fear. Through sheer will and determination, Christopher makes it to Reave Castle and Rohan who takes him in.

While that has been Finn's experience, Rohan has spent every day searching for the tree with leaves of glass, determined to destroy the Wall and get to Finn. He works alongside his beloved friends, Serxio and Leonid, but also with his Uncle Hugues, who Rohan isn't sure he can trust. For when they were sent back from the Empire to Rirea, he found that his uncle had already taken the throne and contacted the leaders of Bolan, Sultane and the Achuviel Kingdom to come for a summit at Reave Castle to discuss an alliance against Thalanil.

While Hugues cedes the throne back to Rohan, Rohan discovers that his uncle knew not only about Finn's existence as the son of his former lover and King Thalanil, but also the horrible circumstances that Finn was living in yet did nothing to help him. Further, Hugues' seeming deep knowledge of the Aeturnals disturbs Rohan. He feels he cannot trust his uncle even as the man provides him with books that speak of the Aeturnals and how they ruled with their "Bonded Ones" until the gods turned against them.

Serxio had a mad plan to stand on the old road that connected Aymar and Reave Castle, right by the Wall, and have a banner trying to get Thalanil--but, more importantly, Finn's--attention. Rohan no longer believes that Thalanil is his enemy, rather it is Marikoth, but he needs all the help he can get against the Death Mage. But on their way to put up the banner, a mob of people from the city meets them in the streets.

It turns out that homeless and poor people have been disappearing from the city recently and the mayor has refused to investigate. Rohan does and finds Hannah, the young farm girl whose brother,

Jeremy, was "saved" by Marikoth, whom she calls the "Glowing Man", in town. The girl explains in halting terms what the Glowing Man did to her brother and neighbors and warns that she's seen him in town. Rohan, Serxio and Leonid realize that Marikoth is stalking Dawnmore's streets and beyond. They must track him down and stop him!

They start their hunt for Marikoth at Hannah and Jeremy's old farmhouse. They soon find strange tracks that lead into the Lupine Woods. Following these, they come upon a beautiful glade where someone is clearly living, except they aren't there at that moment, but three undead are, Jeremy included.

Rohan, Serxio and Leonid battle the three undead, realizing that the only thing that can kill them is fire. But after those three are dead, they hear countless undead moans from all around them. Rohan exhausts his magic to protect himself and his friends from the undead horde, and they would have been overcome had not King Tearlach and his warriors ridden to their aid.

The giant Achuvien king still seems to have romantic intentions towards Rohan, but he keeps them light and teasing, even when he realizes that Rohan cares for someone else. But he does reveal that he, too, knows Marikoth. The Death Mage had been his Court Magician until Marikoth betrayed him in some way. The undead, Tearlach claims, are Marikoth's creations and he has been tracking the Death Mage and the undead from his own kingdom. He's also there for the summit.

They return to Reave Castle and discover Christopher there with the Luminus. They are able to all speak to Finn and fill each other in on everything that's happened. Finn is alarmed at talk of the undead. He is glad that Christopher is safe and it is agreed that Christopher will stay on at the castle as an alchemist. Rohan gives Christopher some of the books he discovered in Marikoth's glade to examine. They need to know how Marikoth is turning villagers into the creatures they faced.

Finn and Rohan promise that they will speak to one another regularly over the Luminus to keep each other informed as well as simply to see one another. Finn is convinced he can change Thalanil's mind about Rohan. But before they get to speak again things take a dark turn in the Empire.

While Finn is outside Aymar's walls--having found Ryleth and other villagers--the palace is attacked by hundreds of enraged Ostils, the tree-like creatures that Finn faced before in Ryleth's village. He and Ryleth go to help, with Finn believing he can possibly speak to the Ostils like he had earlier. But they cannot be reached. They are insane and intent on killing everyone. Finn realizes he has no other choice but to use Death Magic to save the day.

Thalanil has been trapped inside with his Council, including Lord Paquen--who is eager to get more power--and Lady Beinelis--Thalanil's trusted friend--sparring over whether there's something suspicious about Thalanil's human-looking son, Finn. There are rumors already that he's a Death Mage. When the Ostils come, and Finn levitates into the sky, and destroys them all except one to go back and tell others to stay away, all doubts are gone.

But Finn collapses after the battle and falls into a death-like sleep where the raven speaks to him. It claims to be the God of Death and Finn is its Chosen. Then Finn is thrust into a strange vision. It's

of Christopher in the lower levels of Reave Castle being chased by the undead…

In *Cinders & Ashes* Book 4, Thalanil has left an unconscious Finn in Ryleth's care as he travels at all due speed to see his father in order to find out about Death Mages and Death Magic to help his son. But while the Empire has survived its attack by the Ostils, Reave Castle is now in danger from the undead!

But there's more danger from the living. Marikoth has infiltrated the castle and is holding Rohan hostage unless Finn returns to Rirea immediately, which Finn discovers by sharing Rohan's body like he did once before when Rohan faced Hex. Marikoth makes clear that he no longer simply wants revenge against his family for exiling him, but believes that he and Rohan are destined to restore and rule the Empire together. He is a Death Mage and Rohan is the Heir of House Aeturnal. Not to mention that Finn is simply too good-hearted to do what has to be done: namely overthrow Thalanil. Rohan rejects him, but Marikoth is not dissuaded.

Desperate to save Rohan, the raven appears to Finn and tells him that the only way to return to Rirea and save Rohan is to fly Silver Soul, the wyvern queen who is said to kill anyone who attempts to ride her. Finn has no other choice and he goes to the Wyvern Tower where he approaches the huge wyvern. Despite her fierce reputation, they are able to speak telepathically and she agrees to help him. For her the Wall is not even there, which hints that she might be more than she seems.

She flies Finn to Reave Castle in time. He fights his way to Rohan through seas of undead despite the fact that his Death Magic does not seemingly work against them. It is the magical ring, Amarathar, that saves the day. Finally, Finn faces off against Marikoth, or rather only thinks he does. Marikoth shows him a fantasy where he is a beloved nephew and student of Marikoth's and Rohan is Finn's husband. But Finn sees through the trick when he realizes his father is nowhere to be found in this fantasy.

In fact, Marikoth is asking *Finn* where his father is. It is then that Finn realizes Marikoth believed that the only way Finn could get to Reave Castle in time was to convince Thalanil to teleport him there. And since Thalanil would never send his son alone to face Marikoth, the Death Mage believed that Finn would bring Thalanil right to him. Both realize their mistake. For Thalanil is nowhere to be found and the "Marikoth" that Finn faces is just a glamourized undead.

Having saved Rohan from Marikoth, Finn decides to stay in Rirea to keep Rohan safe from the other Death Mage. Rohan not only recovers from Marikoth's draining, but after he and Finn make love, the entire castle starts to bloom. Through the joining of their powers, Rohan and Finn are able to restore the rose garden at Reave Castle. This gives both of them hope that they can save Rirea together.

But it is what they find *beneath* the castle that raises more questions than answers. There is a tomb of the last Aeturnal king and his Bonded One below the castle. The statues of these two former rulers of the Empire show visages almost the exact same as Rohan and Finn's, leading the two to wonder if they are not these beings reborn.

Also in this tomb, the ceiling is carved to show a war these two fought against a mighty army of monsters called the Dreadbrood. The Dreadbrood, as Tearlach explains, is the God of Death's army and it can only be controlled by Death's Chosen. Finn is shaken by this supposed myth as *he* was called Death's Chosen by the raven.

The tomb is also filled with scrolls, tomes and other ancient writings, which may explain and answer all the questions that these revelations bring. But they are all written in ancient Aeturnal dialects, including Achuvien. Rohan calls in all of the professors from the University to study them and get him and Finn some answers.

Meanwhile, Rohan is determined that Finn should be made Lord of Tanglewood once more. He formally recognizes Finn as the true lord of the manor and it is determined that they return to Tanglewood to eject Gerard Steward from Finn's family home. Finn has Magna, Jacob and Emmott brought to the castle to reveal not only that he is not dead, but that he is Crown Prince of the Empire and Lord of Tanglewood. They had left the Manor after his death, but all eagerly agreed to return to take care of the estate.

A highly unwilling Christopher agrees to accompany Finn, Rohan, Serxio and Leonid on this mission. He has been studying the book that Rohan found in Marikoth's camp and experimenting on the undead. But his unwillingness to return to Tanglewood does not wholly stem from a desire not to leave his work. It becomes clear that Christopher has deep seated guilt about how he behaved when at the Manor. He knew that if he attempted to help others that not only would it be made worse for them, but also, he would draw his father's wrath. In fact, he allowed the servants to believe he had killed another servant named "Old Jonathan" because he wasn't altogether sure his father hadn't. Better to take the blame than face his father's wrath. When he reveals all of this to everyone, he receives forgiveness that he does not think he deserves, but it breaks through his icy exterior.

All of them return to Tanglewood only to find it worse than they ever imagined. Without the servants there to take care of things, the whole house has fallen into filth and disarray. Gerard has taken to drinking constantly in Maeve's old study. Miles has taken to hiding in his room, a ghost of himself compared to what he was before. He hasn't eaten in some time and is terrified of his father.

Rohan is outraged when he truly sees how Finn was living at the Manor. He, Serxio and Leonid forcibly eject Gerard from the Manor. Rohan informs the drunken, rageful Gerard that his crimes against Finn mean that he should be executed, but it will be up to Finn what his fate is.

Finn confronts his stepfather and, in doing so, he sees himself sitting on a strange throne with an icy crown, radiating death. The sky goes dark and is split in two by lightning. Everyone is terrified. But Rohan touches Finn and guides him back to himself.

Finn determines that Gerard should be exiled for his crimes. Death would be too good for him. Imprisonment would mean that they would be haunted by him. So exile it is.

But Finn is haunted more by what happened when he confronted his stepfather rather than his fate. He starts to wonder who and *what* exactly he is.

And that brings us up to date!

PRISONER

Meanwhile, in the Empire…

RYLETH OPENED her eyes and hissed as her head throbbed with pain. She lifted a hand to shield them from the torchlight. It wasn't terribly bright, but to her it seemed like she was staring into the sun. Her brow furrowed and she winced as pain again wracked her head and her body. Broad currents of agony stole her breath and had her gritting her teeth. Only when it subsided to a dull roar was she able to think again.

Where am I?

She had no idea. It was nowhere she had ever been before. So she took stock of her surroundings. She was lying on a rough bench. She felt straw poking through her clothes. She was already starting to itch. The ceiling above her was painted in stripes. No, not painted. The lines wavered. Flickered. Shadows and light. The torchlight was being blocked by something that had regular intervals. She turned her head to the side, wincing with every millimeter of movement, until she saw the bars and everything became terribly clear.

A prison cell!

She sat up too quickly and the world spun sickeningly. She put a hand to her right temple and squeezed her eyes shut until the sensation of movement stopped. Pain sloshed around inside of her like acid splashing against the sides of a cup. She breathed through it. What had happened to her to cause this? She felt like she'd been in a fight for her life, but there was just a blank where the battle should have been.

She slowly opened her eyes again, focusing just on what was in front of her. A rough bench attached to a stone wall with thick, black chains. A stone floor strewn with straw a few feet below the bench. Black metal bars surrounding her on the rest of the three sides. She touched the stone wall, splaying her fingers wide against it. She could feel its age. She followed the stone upwards, to the ceiling and knew where she was-

I'm in a dungeon! Aymar's dungeon!

The memory of what had happened to her raced through her mind then. She and Tyreon had been on their way to the Luminus when they had heard a man and a woman plotting against King Thalanil and Prince Finrael Ravenspar. She'd gone with Tyreon to report this to Finn over the magical device, but one of those plotting, hooded figures was using the Luminus already. And they'd heard her and Tyreon coming!

She'd raced towards the rooftop where the wyverns were kept while Tyreon had done the *smart* thing and headed back down the tower steps. Though she had managed to hide from the hooded traitor in a wyvern lair, they'd left a trap back at the Luminus room that she'd blundered into like a first-year novice.

Things must be very dire for King Thalanil if they are using his own dungeon to imprison those loyal to him. All the more reason for me to get out of here and warn him and his son.

Head still throbbing, she managed to turn her body so that her legs slid off of the bench and touched the floor. She sat there and breathed around the pain and nausea once more. Whatever the trap had been, it had been powerful. She was likely lucky it hadn't killed her outright. Someone who could arrange that spell must be a powerful mage indeed. And that would mean getting out of here would be that much more difficult, because they wouldn't imprison her in any place less dangerous.

One step at a time. Everything is possible. Even escaping Aymar's dungeon, though no one else has ever done it.

She pushed the despairing thought away. Where there was life there was hope. Where there was a will there was a magical solution. So she took to orientating herself.

She was in a long hallway of cells. They were each separated by several feet with a torch in between them. There was no light down here other than what was given off by the torch. No windows. No doors. No air…

Do not panic, Ryleth! She warned herself as one hand crept up to her collar and tugged it away from her throat as if more air could make it into her lungs that way.

"It's you," a male voice said, that was both mulish and dead-sounding.

Her head jerked towards the sound. Her eyes narrowed. In the flickering gloom she saw that there was another prisoner across from her and one cell over. This prisoner had unkempt, stringy black hair that covered their pasty face. Their clothes hung off them as if they had been much more muscular but now were pared down to bone and sinew. A ragged, untrimmed beard covered the lower part of the face, but she saw the smile.

"Thomas?" she gasped.

"Yes, it's me. You're the last person I thought to see down here, though I *hoped* you would get your comeuppance. Tela would have been better, but she's better at covering her own ass than you, isn't she?" Thomas' lips writhed back from his teeth as he mentioned her former student.

"I agree with you that Tela is clever at keeping herself in the good graces of people who can save

her from herself," Ryleth answered. She rather wished Tela was down here herself. "But that won't last. You had the same gift, Thomas, and yet here you are. Time and favor run out."

"Here *you* are too. The once mighty priestess is an anonymous prisoner of King Thalanil!" Thomas laughed harshly.

Ryleth carefully stood up. She didn't try to walk until she was sure that her feet were firmly beneath her and wouldn't give out. Then she took the few steps it took to reach the bars. She noticed that though Thomas was near the bars, he was not touching them. She allowed her eyes to go unfocused and she saw the runes on the metal. They were magical warding spells that would harm any prisoner who touched them, but also kept any magic the prisoner might generate from leaving the cell. She had always wondered how they kept powerful magical prisoners in cages. Now she knew. The more energy used against the bars would only fuel the warding spell. She kept her hands to her sides.

"King Thalanil did not imprison me," she answered finally.

"Oh, no? Didn't he find out about that Death Mage you were harboring, not to mention the Heir of House Aeturnal?" Thomas scoffed.

"That Death Mage is King Thalanil's son," she answered with a surprising amount of patience for his tone. But she wanted to know things and it wasn't like she could harm him further or help him either. She wanted to keep him talking. He'd been down here a long time. He must know something about the cells and the dungeon overall. "And the Heir is King Rohan De Clare of Rirea."

Thomas' mouth opened for a moment and then he closed it and shook his head. "Dammit! I knew there was something about them! If I'd just played it right and stayed in their corner--"

"And not *killed* Emma?" Ryleth's voice held a warning note. She cursed herself internally for bringing that up.

But that just made Thomas laugh harshly. "Don't pretend you care about humans now, Ryleth! Well, maybe you do if they're mixed blood and royal! But me and Emma? You didn't give a damn about us so don't get up on your high horse with me! How many humans did you murder? How many went to Hex's fangs?"

Ryleth prepared to snap back, but she didn't. Was Thomas actually wrong? No, no, if she were honest with herself she had always treated humans as lesser. How many had she sacrificed to Hex after all? Too many to count. No precious Fae would have been chained to that rock to be sucked dry, but countless human slaves had been. But Finn, Rohan, Serxio and Leonid had changed her mind about humans.

"Fair point, Thomas," she answered with a sigh.

"You're agreeing with me?" He sounded astounded, but also offended. He put a grubby hand against his chest. "Well, I must be dreaming if the great priestess admits that a lowly human is right about anything!"

Ryleth began to pace her cell, studying the warding, the metal and the rock. Were there any weaknesses? Aymar was old, more like ancient. She wasn't sure if these cells were original to the

Aeturnal architecture. She rather hoped that they weren't, because Aeturnal things lasted while everything else had a shelf life. Unlike the Ravenspar kings of old, Thalanil did not keep many prisoners, hence why she and Thomas were alone down here, so she hoped that he hadn't kept up the place.

She did see that someone had tried to chisel the stone away from some of the bars nearest the wall, likely trying to find the end of it so that it could be bent out of the way to make an opening large enough to crawl through. But they hadn't gotten very far in their chiseling. Besides, touching the bars would cause agony. Still, she wondered how strong the metal was. She noted some pitting and areas of rust. The warding spells were not fresh either. Could they be drained?

"It's pointless, you know?" Thomas asked as he watched her minutely examine her cell. He was seated on the bench, legs crossed at the ankles. "You're not getting out. More powerful Mages than you have been in this place and died here."

"Does it comfort you to give up?" she asked as she continued to study the spells. "To think that others can do no more than you?"

"It's just the truth!" Thomas growled.

"No, Thomas, it's *not*. Most humans are not like you. They didn't all make deals and live their lives trying to pick the winning team," she said as her eyes followed the spells into the ceiling.

The wards did *not* spread over the whole of the stone ceiling. Maybe they once had, but there was an opening now that she could see. Could she break through the ceiling to the floor above? How much stone was there? Possibly a lot. And the noise it would cause would likely alert someone. Unless she created a very large blast...

"Thomas, how many guards are in this place?" she asked.

Thomas' face was in shadow, but his sneer made it across in his tone. "Not going to get out of here, Ryleth."

"Humor me."

He let out a sigh that puffed up his overly long bangs. "Only two that I've ever seen. They play cards down there."

He tilted his head to her left. She got as close to the bars as she could without touching them and peered down the hallway. She thought she could see a table and two people sitting opposite one another with a candle in between them. The torches and the candles looked to be Ever Burns, meaning they were treated magically and would never go out unless magically snuffed. Maybe she should try and call to them and insist that they talk to someone in authority like Lady Beinelis to confirm she shouldn't be down here.

Unless Lady Beinelis was one of the hooded people that was threatening to overthrow King Thalanil.

"Thomas, did you see who brought me down here?" she asked.

"Why does it matter?" Thomas asked.

"It matters," she said. "Who brought me?"

"If it matters then you'll give me something for it," he wheedled.

She stretched her arms to her sides. "What do I have to give you? I have nothing. Just like you have nothing."

"Oh, but I do have something: information. Information you want. So what do you have?" he pushed back.

"What do you want?" she retorted with exasperation. She was tempted to empty her pockets out and show him that they were filled only with lint.

"So many things, Ryleth. But, most of all, I want to go *home*." He said the word "home" with such longing and grief that Ryleth felt a stab of shame cut through her.

Every Fae would claim that there was nothing better than the Empire. Anyone who was allowed to even experience the Empire was blessed in most Fae's minds. Yet all Thomas had experienced of it was life as a slave. Every single beauty it might have offered was withheld from him. His family and friends--all back in Rirea--would have grown old and died before he'd made it through but a fraction of his servitude. The fact that she'd never considered all of this--never allowed herself to--seemed more than shameful now. Had it taken royal humans to make her see the truth of these "deals"? Was she such a snob? Perhaps, but not any longer.

Yet he murdered Emma. There must be punishment for that! But his whole time here has been punishment. I… I need his help though.

"I intend to make my way to Rirea to speak to King Rohan." She did not mention that Finn was there. "If I get out of here, I'll ask to take you with me. I can't imagine the humans would care to keep you as a prisoner. Better to just send you away."

He stared at her for long moments. "I don't believe you."

"It's true! I assure you that I--"

"Even if it's *true*, you're never getting out of here Ryleth! People are put down here to be forgotten, to go mad and to die!" he shouted at her. "So try again. Offer me something you can actually *give*."

"You know I have nothing else!"

"Then I have nothing to say." He crossed his too thin arms over his chest and settled his back against the wall.

She considered his thinness. The humans under her care had been well fed. The food might have been slightly plainer than what the Fae ate, but not by much. Yet from the looks of him now, he seemed starved. Would that be her fate if she was down here for any length of time? She shuddered, but then reminded herself that Thalanil was returning in a week or so. He'd notice her absence. Finn would realize something was wrong before that. Though would he return to the Fae Empire to simply check on her? She thought he might. Or maybe that was just wishful thinking.

"Once we're fed, I'll give you my food, Thomas, if you tell me who brought me here," she

offered.

His head turned towards hers. “How are you going to get it to me? Fling it? Put your hand through those bars--even if you don’t touch them--and you’ll experience the shock of a lifetime.”

“Is anything else affected by the magic?”

“Like what?”

“Do they give us bread? I could toss you a roll,” she pointed out.

He snorted and shook his head. “You think I’ll give you anything for a *roll*?”

She grimaced. He was too angry at her to help. If he even knew anything at all. He could have been asleep when she was brought. Or the person could have still been hooded and cloaked and he could have seen nothing. So if she was going to learn anything, she had to do it herself.

“Guards! GUARDS!” she called down the aisle.

Thomas let out a huff of laughter as she continued to try and reach the two guards down the row. He muttered under his breath, “You’ll learn it’s not a good idea to draw attention to yourself in here.”

But she ignored him. If Lady Beinelis wasn’t behind her imprisonment, the woman would assist her. And if she was an enemy, well, it would be good to know that too. She needed information.

Finally, after what seemed like ages, one of the guards strolled down the aisle, his thumbs tucked into his sword belt, and a grim expression on his face. He stopped in front of her cell, just a few inches away from her, trusting in the warding magic that she couldn’t reach through and grab him or that her magic couldn’t escape the cell and strike him either.

“What do you want?” the guard snarled.

All Fae were seen as beautiful by humans as their basest members far outshone mortals’ looks. But there were distinctions and this guard was one of the ugliest Fae she’d ever seen. From the hard set of his jaw and the too-narrow eyes, he appeared to be squinting all the time.

“I want to be set free,” she answered simply.

He let out a harsh laugh that echoed all around them. “You want to be let out, do you? Well, fancy that! A prisoner wants out of their cell!”

“I’ve been put here by traitors to the crown,” she explained calmly, even as her hands curled into fists.

“Oh, ho! You have, have you?” He looked amused.

“I am Prince Finrael Ravenspar’s Mentor,” she continued.

“Yes, I know!” The guard’s smile was a little sharper.

“You… know?” She blinked slowly.

“Well, that’s why you're down here, isn’t it?” He looked distinctly angry now and his hand dropped to the sword at his waist.

Except it wasn’t a sword. It was some kind of club that sparked and sizzled when he took it out of his belt loop. Ryleth held herself very still as she prepared to jump away from him should he poke it through the bars.

“Why do you think I’m down here?” she asked.

“Because you’re a Mentor to the false king’s son,” the guard answered her.

She didn’t get a chance to jump back when he used the club. Not that he had to slide it through the bars to get her. He merely had to touch the bars lightly with it. And the entirety of the cell filled with brilliant blue-white light and she was sent back into darkness.

FAMILY

Prince Finrael Ashton Ravenspar enjoyed his hot chocolate out on the balcony of Rohan's bedroom. He was swaddled in furs, which kept the chill wind from his skin. The hot chocolate kept him warm inside. He closed his eyes and sipped the rich, creamy, chocolaty goodness. Hot chocolate was such an indulgence, a *guilty* indulgence, especially when so many people were suffering from lack of food in Rirea.

But Rohan and I are going to change that starting today.

Rohan was currently engaged in getting things set up for the first step of that plan. Their lovemaking caused flowers to bloom, vines to grow and even for the castle garden to explode with fruit and vegetables. So it was determined that they were going to try and make a field nearby fertile just like he had done with Tanglewood. The idea this time, though, was not to steal life from anywhere else, but use their combined powers to *create* life all on their own.

Finn wasn't sure if it would work, and he was more than willing to go with plan B, which was stealing the extra life from the Empire to assist in restoring Rirea. This time he had no fear of the Fae finding out what he was doing. He was the Crown Prince of the Empire after all and, therefore, he had the *right* to take what he wanted from Empire. Besides, removing some of the overgrowth would only help the Fae.

There was a knock on the bedroom door that brought him out of his thoughts. It was quick and efficient. Finn knew it was Christopher even before he stretched out his senses towards the door.

"Come in!" Finn called, knowing that Christopher would find him.

He was trying to perform some of the magic that was written about in the scrolls and books that Head Librarian Crosley, Professors Tilan and Riana, and their army of students were slowly translating for them from the tomb in the catacombs beneath Reave Castle. According to the scrolls, every life force had a signature; therefore, a Death Mage could identify people nearby without seeing them. They did not even have to be nearby. If he stretched his senses out wide enough he could sense Hannah with Cook Shelton in the kitchen, Katie in the dining room, and all their friends. It was a useful skill and he actually enjoyed doing it. It was a bit of magic that wasn't destructive.

Finn had one of the scrolls beside his hot chocolate cup along with a translation next to it. He felt

a little guilty about that because Crosly had been so adamant about how delicate the scrolls were and how they should not be handled near any food or drink. But Finn found he concentrated best outside with the hot chocolate to warm him. Christopher, though, distracted him from his guilt as his eldest stepbrother appeared in the balcony doorway.

"I'm going to kill Miles," Christopher pronounced.

"Would you like to sit down and tell me about it?" Finn gestured to a chair opposite him. "What about some hot chocolate?"

Christopher made a sound that didn't exactly sound like an assent, but he did perch on the edge of said chair. "Serxio already brought me breakfast. I am full."

"Serxio and Leonid really do take care of you. I'm so glad," Finn said.

"I do not quite understand why they do this, but yes, it is welcome. It helps me focus on important things," Christopher admitted. "Unlike Miles. He won't stop following me around. I can get no work done with him always *there*."

Christopher made a gesture to the space to his left as if it was currently occupied by Miles. It was not.

"It seems like you're free of him now," Finn pointed out gently.

"Only because I tricked him into thinking I was going to my lab then doubled back, had Hannah lie about seeing me, and sprinted here!" Christopher explained. "I locked your door just in case he tries to get in."

Finn blinked. "All right, that's very… ah, *thorough*."

"I have to be." Christopher leaned forward. "He's like a--a barnacle stuck to me!"

It had only been two weeks since they'd exiled his stepfather, Gerard Steward, from Rirea and rescued Miles from the abusive man. Finn wasn't surprised that Miles was intent on being by Christopher's side at all times. It was likely the only place Miles felt truly safe.

"He's still fragile, Christopher. You remember what Dr. Lewis said about--"

"I'm going to *kill* Miles, Finn!" Christopher's normally pale cheeks flushed. "He can hardly recover if he is *dead*!" He ran a shaky hand across his forehead. "I need to work! I'm so close to discovering the undead's secrets, but I need complete and utter concentration! Miles *chatters*. Not just to me, but to bowls and alembics and the table! It doesn't matter. He talks to the undead even though he complains about them smelling!"

Finn winced. Miles' talking notoriously bothered Christopher. It had ever since they were young children.

"You realize his talking is an improvement from before, don't you?" Finn pressed.

Christopher closed his eyes. "I know. He's still shrinking down when I raise my voice, but… Finn, I cannot do my work this way!"

"And your work is important," Finn agreed. "I'm sorry, Christopher, I should have realized how hard this has been on you."

Christopher stared at the table. “I realize that neither Miles nor myself are really *your* problem, Finn. You’ve shown us more kindness than we deserve.”

Finn reached across the table and touched Christopher’s curled up hand. “You’re my family, Christopher. You always have been.” Christopher’s hand tightened. “No matter what. So I’ll see what I can do about distracting Miles and giving you a reprieve so you can work.”

Christopher’s Adam's apple bobbed rapidly as he swallowed. “My work really is important, Finn. I promise it will be of great use to you and the king.”

“I know that, Christopher, and we both appreciate it,” Finn assured him, even as his heart hurt hearing Christopher’s unsaid plaintive wail that he *wasn’t* useless like Gerard had always told him.

Christopher stood up. He gave a brief bow. “Thank you for seeing me.”

“Of course,” Finn said. “You’re welcome to stay, but I have a feeling you want to get back to your lab.”

“Yes, please, I would not be good company at the moment in any case,” Christopher admitted.

“Then, we’ll speak later.”

Christopher gave another bow and hustled out of Finn’s sight. Finn sighed. He needed to get Serxio or Leonid in here to brainstorm about what they should do with Miles. Dr. Lewis, a kindly old man with a gentle smile and bright inquisitive eyes, had examined Miles when they’d brought him to the castle from Tanglewood. His recommendation had been that Miles not be returned to the Manor even though Magna, Emmott and Jacob had been willing to look after him there while he recuperated. Dr. Lewis had worried that the associations Miles had with Tanglewood and Gerard were simply too strong.

“We need to break him out of any bad mental habits he developed there,” Dr. Lewis had explained in his dry, yet warm voice. “He needs new places, but with familiar faces, if that makes sense. His mind will heal in time, but he needs gentleness and understanding.”

These last two things had never been Christopher’s strength to give. So add that to Miles’ new fragility and it was a recipe for disaster. Finn should have realized this earlier, but he’d been wrapped up in Rohan and their plans to restore Rirea.

Now I must focus on Miles, too.

Finn rose up from his nest of furs and headed into the bedroom. He wore a loose pair of fawn-colored leggings and one of Rohan’s oversized white, flowy shirts with one of the king’s red silk robes thrown over it. It was as much for warmth as to comfort himself with Rohan’s scent. He went to the door of the bedroom, glancing at the Luminus as he did so. No contact from Ryleth. He frowned even as he kept moving.

He’d expected to hear from the Fae priestess long before now, but he hadn’t. He hoped that time had simply gotten away from her as it moved so much more slowly in the Empire than Rirea. But he was a little worried that something might have happened while he and his father were both away. If he didn’t hear from her in a day or so, he would call upon Silver Soul, his grandmother’s wyvern, to fly

him back to Aymar and check on her. The queen wyvern had remained in Rirea after bringing him here and visited him nearly every day. But he dragged his eyes away from the Luminus. That was a problem for another moment.

He opened the bedroom door, expecting to speak to one of the guards who always stood outside, and ask them to go find Leonid or Serxio or both of them. But just as he opened the door he was face to face with Rohan's uncle, Lord Hugues De Clare. The older man had his right hand lifted, likely prepared to knock, just as Finn had opened the door. They both stood there, staring stupidly at one another, for what seemed like ages.

"Lord De Clare, Rohan is not here, I'm afraid," Finn said into the awkward silence.

He doubted that the Rirean noble had come to speak to *him*. They hadn't exchanged more than a few words in the weeks since Finn had arrived to save Rohan and the castle from Marikoth and the undead.

"Oh, yes, well, then I'll come back later," Hugues said, lowering his hand.

That was when Finn saw the book tucked under Hugues' other arm. He recognized it as one of the books from the tomb of the last Aeturnal and Bonded One. Every time he saw one of the books or scrolls, a sense of electricity filled him. That same thing occurred now. But something else filled him too: anger.

"Did you find something out from the tomb?" Finn asked slightly sharply.

"I--I--yes, I did, but I think that Rohan should hear--"

"If Rohan should hear it then so should I. Come in." Finn stepped to the side and gestured for the older man to enter.

This was where the anger originated. Hugues was only allowed to access the tomb, because *Finn* had agreed to it. Rohan had left it up to him to decide if Hugues should have any access to his and Rohan's past. For they believed more and more that they weren't just the descendants of the people in the tomb, but maybe they *were* them. So if Hugues had discovered something in the tomb he should be sharing it with Finn as much as Rohan, maybe more so.

Hugues hesitated a moment, but then he stepped inside. Finn directed him to go out onto the balcony. He dipped his head back out of the doors and spoke to one of the guards, asking her to find either Serxio or Leonid and send them up to him as he had a matter to discuss. She nodded smartly. Finn went back inside and shut the door behind him. He stood there for long moments as he tried to center himself.

This is Rohan's uncle. His only living family member. Whatever wrongs he did me or my mother I should try and set them aside. The past is the past.

But for all his good intentions, anger coiled inside of him like a serpent as he strode back to the balcony. Out of the corner of his eye, he thought he saw raven wings flapping. But when he turned his head to confirm it there was nothing there.

He found Hugues standing at the balcony, looking out at the city of Dawnmore. The cool wind

stirred his gray hair and jostled his long, golden brown robes. He turned as he heard Finn come outside. Finn gestured to a seat at the table while he reentered his blanket nest. He drew the blankets up around his shoulders not just for warmth, but almost as physical protection against the emotional turmoil he felt when facing Hugues.

"Would you like some hot chocolate?" Finn asked, his voice slightly stiff and formal.

Hugues brightened like a child and said, "Oh, yes, please."

Finn poured out in silence and slid the delicate porcelain cup to Hugues. The man sipped it with closed eyes. There was a mustache of cream above his upper lip that he licked off with pleasure. He slowly lowered the cup back down to the saucer, smiling still. Finn, however, noted that he kept the book safely in his lap, out of Finn's reach. Finn's hands curled halfway into fists beneath the table. That was *Rohan's* book. That was a book about him and Rohan. The only people it benefited were him and Rohan. But here Hugues was keeping it to himself.

Just like he kept all that information from Rohan about his heritage and the true murderer of his parents. I don't believe he ever thought Thalanil had done it. He must have known it was Marikoth all along. And he was so quick to take the throne after Rohan disappeared. He is not trustworthy.

"Your mother loved sweets. Fruits and pies and cakes, of course, but chocolate was her favorite," Hugues said almost blithely as if he didn't think that mentioning Finn's mother to him would be unwise.

Finn had only hazy memories of her, bits and pieces that he could still recall, as she had died--*I killed her*--when he was only five-years-old. So it was tempting to ask someone who had known her far better than he had what she had been like. But she had chosen Gerard over being with Hugues so that said something about what she thought of Lord De Clare. If he wanted to know his mother more, he should ask his father about her, not this man. But still… Hugues was here and clearly wished to reminisce.

"What else did my mother like?" Finn asked.

"Animals of all sorts. Horses were a big draw for her and her for them." He laughed, clearly some memory speaking to him. "We had this very wild stallion, Rumble, who no one could ride. He'd bucked the last trainer off and no one would touch him. But your mother simply walked up to the snorting, dancing beast and spoke softly to him. The stallion calmed almost immediately. Within minutes, she had saddled him and was riding him easily. Anyone could ride him after that."

Finn thought of Sweetfire and swallowed. He knew the mare was being taken care of in the Empire, but he wished she were here. Tempest too. He hoped the horses were keeping each other company.

"She was also highly skilled with the blade and bow. Though she was not fond of hunting, when the wolves became too aggressive, your mother was the first to be out there culling their numbers and saving lives," Hugues said with a respectful expression on his face. "She did so without help.

Certainly no guards. Even then the estate could hardly provide for what little people were still on it."

Finn's hands tightened more. *And even that became worse, but he did nothing to help.*

"And she was very well read. You couldn't name a philosophical text that she did not know and understand at a granular level. She could use that knowledge to her advantage. No one got a better deal than her. Not that she was crass or hard, but she convinced people to be fair," Hugues murmured. "The only time I wondered about her judgment was when…"

He stopped and shot Finn a guilty look.

"When *what*?" Finn asked. "You might as well tell me. I know you're thinking something bad."

"Not bad. Just it perplexes me and I'm sure you, too," Hugues said. "Why she chose to marry Gerard?"

"Over *you*?" Finn's voice dipped low.

But Hugues did not take offense. He shook his head. "No, we were over long before Gerard entered the picture. But then, perhaps things had gotten so bad on the estate that she felt she had no choice."

Finn did not for one minute believe that Hugues had not known the status of Tanglewood. He could imagine Hugues coming to his mother when the chips were down and offering to "save her" and Thalanil's child. And he could very well imagine his mother telling Hugues to fob off and marrying Gerard instead. Indeed, Finn could believe that Hugues might have even helped make the estate stumble more in its finances. Gerard was her only recourse. That had to explain it. That and…

"He was a different person when Mother was alive," Finn said quietly.

Hugues lifted his eyebrows. "Really?"

"Yes, I was young, obviously, when she… she died," Finn swallowed, "but I remember how he was with her. She didn't adore him, but she was fond of him. He adored her though. I saw that."

After long moments of silence, Hugues said, "She was a woman who was worth adoring."

"Yes. So what have you found?" Finn asked, cutting to the chase, not wanting to discuss the past any longer.

Hugues blinked as if Finn had physically jolted him out of that past.

"Yes, yes, of course, you are planning to revitalize a field this afternoon. I am certain you are busy preparing for that," Hugues said awkwardly as he picked up the book from his lap. "I've been doing my own translation of some of the books that Head Librarian Crosley is not yet interested in and I found some more information on the Dreadbrood."

Hugues' gaze flickered to him and then back down to the book.

"And what did you find?" Finn prompted, even as a trickle of unease went through him at the mention of the God of Death's great army.

"I was surprised that you were a Death Mage," Hugues said, bright blue eyes fixing upon him.

Finn blinked. What did that have to do with the book? And the Dreadbrood? Or anything?

"I'm sorry, but what--"

“All the literature says that there should be only *one*,” Hugues said with an almost intensity in his voice and gaze. “And Marikoth already existed well before you were even conceived.”

“The literature must be wrong then, because here I am,” Finn answered with an uncertain smile.

“Yes, yes, well…” Hugues drifted off and stared back down at the book.

“Does this have something to do with what you’ve found in that book?” Finn was surprised by how sharp he sounded, but really Hugues was being rude!

“The book speaks of a being called the Death’s Chosen.” Hugues smoothed one of his hands over the top of the book. “A being who has the ability to command the Dreadbrood, an unstoppable army. A being who is favored by Death itself.”

Finn’s stomach curdled as he thought of what the raven had said to him not so long ago. “And this Death’s Chosen is *not* a Death Mage?”

“No, though they might have some of the same characteristics as one. A Death Mage is drawing from Death itself, but he or she is cursed for doing so because such power is not for the living,” Hugues continued. “Death's Chosen, however, is *not* cursed. Death is where he finds his power. Death is his power. He would be far more powerful than a mere Death Mage. Far more dangerous. For, unlike a Death Mage, he wouldn’t be a creature of life at all.”

Finn felt the hair on the back of his neck lift. “I don’t understand--”

“The Death's Chosen was created, unlike everyone else, by Death instead of the God of Life. Shaped, formed, molded into something that could advance Death’s agenda on this mortal plain,” Hugues went on, his voice picking up steam as he did. “A being whose pure purpose is to oppose *life*. They are in conflict, you see. Death and Life. These two gods. Always at odds, but needing one another just the same. But each is trying to get the upper hand on the other. Each is seeking a way to tip the scales in its favor. Yet, of course, if that happens, there would be chaos. There would be grave destruction.”

“And you see this opposition to life in *me*?” Finn asked, one hand lifting up and touching the center of his chest.

“What? No, no, I just meant… I--I’m just saying what the book said. I wasn’t suggesting that *you*--”

Finn’s eyes flashed. He felt his magic leap to life, ironically, in his chest. That burning cold fire filled him in seconds. In the corner of his eye, he saw the throne, himself sitting upon it with that crown of ice, and the raven on his shoulder. His eyes were not green, but black and that darkness extended down his face. This image was far more detailed than when he’d first glimpsed it outside of Tanglewood.

“You’re suggesting that between Marikoth and I that *one* of us isn’t what we seem. That *one* of us isn’t an already maligned type of magic user, a Death Mage, but a--a creature born to simply destroy! And you base this off of your poor translation of a single book?!” Finn’s voice rose as he spoke.

“No, I--”

"You were going to tell Rohan this! You were going to suggest that I am a monster! Weren't you?!" Finn roared.

Finn had risen at some point from his chair. He didn't remember doing it. Lightning crackled across the pure blue sky, but the sun was dimming nonetheless. Hugues held up a placating hand, even as his eyes grew huge and his face paled before Finn's anger and the very sky's behavior.

"I did not mean to offend you, I--"

"If I am this great god's messenger," Finn leaned forward and the sky grew darker. He saw his doppelganger smiling grimly on the throne of bones. It was made of bones, he saw now. Stacks and stacks of bones, not stone at all, "aren't you the greatest fool of all for threatening me like this? Because what can *you* do, old man? What can you do against the Chosen of a god?"

Lightning split the sky. The thunder seemed to rock Reave Castle's foundations. His doppelganger on the throne was laughing in delight now. Clapping his hands and bowing to Finn. But inside Finn realized that what he'd just done hadn't made Hugues' words--and his evident fears--seem foolish, but had *confirmed* them.

What if he's right? What have I done? Oh, gods.

Finn sat back down and forced the darkness away. He breathed deeply as he pulled the furs around him. The sun was bright. The sky was blue. There was no sign of lightning or thunder. Everything was as it had been. And yet, nothing was. Finn's hands shook so he hid them in the furs.

"You must hate my father very much," Finn said quietly.

"What?" It was Hugues' turn to act perplexed.

"You watched me suffer under my stepfather's cruelty and now you would come here and try to spoil my relationship with Rohan," Finn said. "Since you do not know me, and you supposedly loved my mother, your behavior can only be explained by hating my father."

"I want to protect my nephew," Hugues said after a long moment.

"From me?"

"From anyone who would harm him," Hugues clarified.

"Well, I can tell you that no matter what I am--Death Mage or Death's Chosen or just a simple Mage--that I would *never* harm him," Finn answered. "You, on the other hand, I am uncertain of. I wish you to leave now."

Hugues rose with an alacrity that told Finn he was afraid of him. While there was a momentary jolt of satisfaction that this man who had watched from afar as he suffered was scared of what he might do, Finn also felt sick because of it. That wasn't who he was. He didn't harm people unless he had to. And he didn't need to harm Hugues.

Hugues inclined his head and said, "Prince Ravenspar."

He started to leave, but Finn called out to him, "The book stays here. I will have it translated by an *expert* and see what it truly says."

Finn tapped the table where Hugues reluctantly set the book down. The older man was frowning.

“I believe you when you say that you don’t want to hurt Rohan,” Hugues said quietly. “But there are forces at work in this world that do not want the Heir to House Aeturnal to rule again and fix what is broken. I hope you would wish to be aware of all of those forces.”

Even as he’s saying that I am one of them? No…

The older noble then walked out and disappeared from view. But though he was gone, Finn still felt his presence there. Poisoning everything.

AN UNEASY SKY

Earlier…

ROHAN, Serxio and Leonid were looking at the back of a large cart in the castle's courtyard. Inside it were packets of seeds that had been dug out of cold storage. They hadn't been planted this year because everything that touched the soil--except in a very few spots--died or mutated into something inedible. But Rohan believed that once he and Finn restored a single field that these seeds could be planted and sprout simply from their magic.

"So we've chosen a field far out of the way where nothing's grown in over ten years, your majesty," Head Gardener Roslyn said, scratching at his white beard, and stopping himself from spitting as he was among royalty. "We did till the land so that the earth is exposed so you can plant, but the soil is gray. Dead."

"It won't be for long, Roslyn," Rohan assured him.

Excitement fizzed in his veins. He found himself unable to stand still so he circled the laden wagon and patted the horses' noses. They nuzzled his palms, looking for apples or something sweet.

"Did you also set up the, ah, structure, I asked for, Roslyn?" Serxio asked with a flicker of eyes towards Rohan.

"I did indeed, Lord Serxio! Though do you anticipate it will take so long that a tent will be needed for sleeping?" Roslyn scratched his beard a whole bunch.

Rohan let out a startled laugh as he realized what the tent was for, while Leonid lifted an eyebrow at the foppish young lord.

"We'll have to see what's necessary! Thank you so much, Roslyn, we've got it from here," Serxio said, gesturing for the gardener to shoo as if Roslyn was a curious cat getting too near Serxio's bowl of cream.

"Aye, aye, if you need anything else, you just hollar," Roslyn said. "I'm mighty interested in this treatment of the land. I used to think I had a green thumb. Now I fear I have a black one since

everything dies."

"It's not you," Rohan assured the elderly man. "You mustn't--"

At that moment, the sky was split in half by lightning. All of them hunched their shoulders. The thunder crack that followed was nearly deafening. Roslyn covered his head with an arm as if he expected parts of the sky to start falling.

"There was no sign of a storm earlier!" Roslyn cried as yet more lightning crackled and thunder boomed.

Rohan's gaze went not to the cloudless sky but to the castle where Finn was. This was *not* Mother Nature's doing. This was a certain Fae prince showing unusual anger. Something must be very wrong. He had to get to Finn.

"Thank you for your assistance, Roslyn. We have to get in now," Rohan said.

"Well, I hope you can still perform your experiment with this storm!" Roslyn looked like he wanted to race underneath anything with a roof.

The sky, though, cleared just as suddenly as it had split open. Roslyn slowly uncoiled himself and stared up at the sky with an open mouth, showing several missing teeth.

"I'll be damned. It's gone away," Roslyn whispered in awe.

"Yes, yes, everything is fine now." Rohan slapped the man's shoulder as he walked past him swiftly into the castle.

"Yes! Thank you, your majesty!" Roslyn called after him.

Roslyn bowed but Rohan barely acknowledged it as he was hurrying towards the castle entrance. Serxio and Leonid were hot on his heels.

"Was that Finn?" Serxio asked as they took the stairs two at a time.

"Same type of weather happened when we were at Tanglewood that day with his stepfather!" Leonid pointed out.

"So he's either being attacked… or he's very angry," Serxio pointed out.

Rohan didn't answer. He knew it was Finn. Finn's magic. Which meant that the young man was very angry or afraid as Serxio indicated. Whichever it was, Rohan would not have him be alone in it. He reached his suite's floor and raced down the hallway only to see his uncle emerging from his bedroom. Hugues looked up and froze when he met Rohan's gaze. Was it a guilty look that he gave Rohan? He'd upset Finn. Rohan knew that immediately and thunder clouded his own features.

"Uncle, what are you doing here?" Rohan asked as he put an arm through his uncle's and led the older man down the hallway away from the Guards at the door.

Serxio and Leonid also remained behind. They were pretending not to listen and giving him privacy with Hugues. Leonid was chatting with the Guards while Serxio, arms crossed at the wrists behind his back, stared up at the ceiling and whistled. It would have been funny if he were not so alarmed at seeing his uncle leaving his rooms.

"What did you *do*?" Rohan growled, his voice low, as he shook Hugues.

"I--I merely came to tell you about a translation I had made of a book from the tomb," Hugues answered. "Prince Finrael insisted on knowing it first. So I told him."

Rohan's expression grew darker. "That's not the whole story!"

"No, but perhaps you should ask *him* what the whole story is. Or me… once you calm down." Hugues brushed Rohan's hands off of him. "I love you, nephew. I've been there for you all your life."

"And?" Rohan asked. "What is that supposed to mean?"

"That you should wonder why you are trusting a young man that you just met more than someone who has loved and cared for you since you were born," Hugues answered, and without seeking leave, he bowed and stalked off.

Rohan stared after him. There were a million things he could have shouted at the old man. But somehow having to yell them at his back would have divested them of much of their power. Instead, he strode to the door to his rooms and entered swiftly with Serxio and Leonid practically running after him. But he did not have to go far. Finn was standing by the Luminus, a book clutched to his chest, and his eyes huge and shimmering with unshed tears.

"Rohan," Finn whispered.

"Finn. Oh, Finn, it's all right. It's all right," Rohan said, not knowing whatever had happened, but wanting Finn to know that it *would* be all right no matter what it was. He drew the young man into his arms and held him tightly. Finn buried his face against Rohan's chest. He felt hot tears and hotter breath through his shirt. "I'm here. I'm here now."

"Rohan, I--I am so sorry about the--the…" Finn merely pointed blindly at the ceiling.

"The lightning? That was you then?"

Finn nodded against his chest, not pulling back so that Rohan could see his face.

"Did Lord De Clare hurt you?" Leonid demanded to know, one hand dropping down onto the hilt of his sword.

That was how low his uncle had gotten in Leonid's opinion that he would threaten violence against him. Rohan felt a sadness at this, but he didn't blame Leonid and he wouldn't chastise him.

This time Finn's head did pop up from his chest as he rushed out, "What? No. No, Hugues didn't hurt me. It was the other way around." Finn's shoulders hunched as he said the last. "I lost my temper."

"Well, if you did, Finn, then it must have been warranted," Serxio said. "You're so kind to everyone whether they deserve it or not!"

Rohan studied Finn's miserable expression. "I agree with Serxio. My uncle must have said or done something very cruel to evoke such anger in you."

Finn swallowed hard. "He just told me about what he'd discovered in a translation."

"He shaded the translation then? He made it something bad?" Serxio suggested.

Finn looked down at the book in his hands. "I'm not sure. Maybe. But what he said… Well, it does not matter what he said. I should not have lost my temper. I didn't hurt him, but I frightened him."

Finn added more softly, "And may have proved his point."

Rohan lifted his eyebrows at this, but he knew that whatever his uncle had suggested was cruel and cutting. Finn gazed up at him with huge eyes that were filled with tears again.

"I am so sorry, Rohan. I cannot say it enough. I should not have behaved as I did to your uncle!" Finn's lower lip trembled.

He framed Finn's face, wiping away tears that started to fall with his thumbs. "It would not matter if you had hurt him. Finn, you don't do things lightly."

"Don't say that!" Finn turned his head away from Rohan and grimaced. "I could have done something terrible out of anger and fear. Something he… he *didn't* deserve."

Again, Rohan simply didn't believe that. But Finn was clearly uncomfortable about saying more about this "translation" that his uncle had given him. Rohan would get it out of Hugues later. It was clearly too upsetting for Finn to discuss. He kissed Finn's temple. Finn slowly turned his head back so that they were looking at one another. The tears were still there, but the look of yearning to be close to him was there as well. He leaned in closer.

"Maybe we should… uhm, leave?" Serxio suggested softly to Leonid and the two of them started to back out of the room.

"Wait! No!" Finn cried, snapping his head towards them. Rohan suppressed a sigh. Finn's cheeks were tearstained and his breath was harsh, but he smiled at Serxio and Leonid. "I need to speak to you two. To ask something of you."

"Of course, Finn!" Leonid said stoutly, nearly saluting.

"Whatever you need!" Serxio agreed.

Finn's smile grew and his expression became filled with affection. "Thank you both. I'm sorry to be asking anything of you, but--"

"Finn, we love doing things for you!" Serxio assured him.

"You ask for so little." Leonid shrugged. "What is it? What can we do?"

"Thank you. Thank you so much." Finn drew in a deep breath. "Christopher needs a break from Miles so he can focus on his work. I was hoping that you could help with that."

"That's all?" Serxio blinked.

"Seriously, no worries! We can keep the boy busy! Maybe some weapons training. Build him up a little." Leonid nodded and stroked his chin.

"Miles and--and *weapons* practice?" Serxio's eyebrows were practically one with his hairline.

"What? Why not? It'll put some color in his cheeks and meat on his bones!" Leonid scowled.

"Have you *met* Miles?" Serxio asked, tilting his head to the side as if that would make Leonid's suggestion make more sense.

"I--I have. You know I have!" Leonid crossed his arms over his chest.

Serxio patted Leonid's right shoulder as he looked over at Finn. "Don't worry, Finn. I will ensure that Miles is amused and not chopped into pieces during a weapons practice."

"Thank you both. Again," Finn said.

"Can we bring him to the field test?" Leonid asked.

Serxio hit him. "No! We're not even going to the field test!"

"What? You aren't?" Finn blinked.

Rohan pinched the top of his nose as he thought of the *tent* that Serxio had arranged to be in that field.

Serxio smiled. "Well, because… you might… well, things have been arranged just in case--"

"*That's* what the tent is for?" Leonid stared at Serxio. "You think they're going to have--ah, they are going to, uhm… well, what people do in tents? Out there? In a dead field?"

"What people do in tents? Such as sleep?" Rohan's voice was dry.

"No, well… maybe after." Leonid turned pink.

"Get out of the rain?" Finn suggested, lips twitching.

"That, too." Leonid was nearly purple now.

"We're trying to bring the field to life *without* having to engage in that every time," Rohan finally said, trying to put poor Leonid out of his misery.

"But it's worked so well in the castle!" Serxio pointed out.

Finn's tears were completely gone now and he laughed, leaning against Rohan's chest happily. "It has, and while it would be *fun* to make love in every field, it might not be terribly practical."

"Well, I've made it practical *today*." Serxio beamed, obviously very proud of what he'd accomplished. "I might have even tucked a picnic basket in the wagon with the seeds!"

"You're incorrigible, Serxio. But in the absolutely best way," Rohan laughed.

"I do try!" More beaming from Serxio.

"As much as I would enjoy being in a *tent* with Rohan, I do want the two of you to come with us," Finn said.

"I agree." Rohan nodded.

"Ah, well, maybe I'll use the tent then to sleep in myself. Take a little nap," Serxio sighed.

"They aren't asking us out there to *nap*, Serxio! There will be seeds to spread and things to do! You're not getting out of it by napping!" Leonid was glaring at the other man.

Serxio sniffed. "Fine. I'll *supervise*."

"You will not! You'll be getting those pretty fingers dirty! Get some earth under those nails!" Leonid told him.

Serxio placed a spotlessly clean and scrubbed hand against his chest. "Dirt and I do not mix. You, on the other hand, are already growing a garden underneath your nails so--"

"Boys," Rohan said and the bickering immediately ceased. He did love the Leonid and Serxio Show, but he was still worried about Finn. "Get on with saving Christopher from Miles and Miles from weapons. Then meet us in the courtyard by the wagon."

Their two friends bowed and quickly exited. Finn sagged a little more against Rohan and that big

smile dimmed only a little. He rubbed his cheek against Rohan's chest and made a soft, pleased sound. But Rohan felt the press of that book against his chest, the one that Finn had been holding before him as if it hurt him.

"What did my uncle do?" Rohan asked softly.

Finn buried his face in Rohan's chest for a moment, just breathing, not crying. "I truly am sorry for frightening your uncle."

"I nearly put the fear of the gods in him myself. I knew he had upset you the moment I saw that guilty look on his face." Rohan raked a hand angrily through his hair as he recalled in detail that *look* his uncle had given him.

"I didn't hurt him, but I could have and that is not right," Finn told him.

"Again, you are too hard on yourself. Your judgment is to be kind to people, to forgive them, instead of to attack," Rohan assured him.

"I'm not like that with everyone. Your uncle is one of those people I simply cannot see the good in." Finn breathed some more before he finally said, "Hugues thinks I'm dangerous to you."

"What?" Rohan's voice held all of his disbelief.

Finn dangerous to *him*? It was completely insane to think that. But his uncle had always seen conspiracies and stratagems against them. Many times he had been right. But about Finn? No. He could trust Finn with his life.

"He doesn't think I'm a Death Mage at all," Finn said.

This caused Rohan's confusion to grow. "I would have thought he'd claim you *being* a Death Mage was the danger to me, but *not* being one? How does that work exactly?"

"Remember when I told you about my dream with the raven?" Finn pulled back from Rohan's chest.

"I do." Rohan nodded.

"It said it was the God of Death and I was Death's Chosen, do you remember me telling you that?"

Rohan nodded again.

Finn pulled out the book from between them. "This book talks about the Death's Chosen. According to the book, the Death's Chosen is *not* a Death Mage, but someone who pulls from the same source of magic. But while a Death Mage is cursed by this, the Death's Chosen isn't, because they are made to do this by Death itself."

Rohan's brow furrowed. He wanted to see if he understood this properly. Yet he had a feeling he must not, because it sounded only *good* to him. He said, "If being Death's Chosen means you *won't* get sick by using your powers then I'm all for this explanation for what you are."

But that didn't make Finn happy. His shoulders sagged. He obviously had wanted Rohan to say that he could not be this Death's Chosen, that he was a Death Mage. Yet why was Finn so desperate for that to be true?

“Tell me what I’m not seeing,” Rohan offered.

“I don’t know myself,” Finn admitted softly. “I’m just… afraid.”

“There’s no reason for you to be afraid, Finn!” Rohan told him, cupping Finn’s face. “It does not matter to me *what* you are, as I love *who* you are. I love you.”

Finn’s eyes brimmed with tears again, but this time, happy ones. “I love you, too, Rohan.”

“And as to you being a danger to me? That is my uncle speaking. He sees only what is in his own heart. Not what is in yours.”

Rohan leaned in and kissed Finn again and again until the young man was laughing in between the kisses. The book was hanging loosely from Finn’s hand, forgotten, and Rohan was glad. Though he was intrigued by everything in the tomb, he would burn it all if it caused Finn pain or fear. The only people he wanted to feel those things were his uncle and Marikoth. He would deal with Hugues later. But now, he was focused only on Finn.

“Do you feel up to creating some life?” Rohan asked.

“Yes, Rohan,” Finn answered. “Let’s start bringing Rirea back to life.”

GRAVE MATTER

Finn curled tighter against Rohan as they rode on the cart out to the field they wished to bring to life. Serxio, Leonid, seeds, and a very substantial picnic lunch were in the back while Finn and Rohan sat on the wooden bench in the front.

Rohan held the reins of two great, dray horses. The horses' ears flickered towards them as if listening to them talk as they plodded along the roads slow and sure. None of the servants had been surprised that Rohan had taken to driving the cart himself, but there had been some half-hearted attempts to do it for him. But all of them knew their king liked to do things for himself and not take the servants from their duties.

"I'm curious what the land will be like," Finn said as he rested his cheek against Rohan's shoulder.

He was rewarded with a kiss on his head. "The Head Gardener told me that it's completely barren. That's why I want to start there. If we can make something grow in that field, we can make something grow anywhere in Rirea."

Finn twisted his head around to look back towards the castle. He made a sound that had Leonid asking, "What is it, Finn?"

"I just noticed that this field is in the same direction as the tomb. I was wondering if… Well, I'm not quite sure what I was wondering," Finn admitted.

"Are you thinking there was a connection between the tomb and the field's barrenness?" Rohan frowned as he asked this. It clearly disturbed him.

Finn nodded slowly. "But I'm not sure why there would be. The Aeturnal King and his Bonded One brought balance and life to the land so it wouldn't make sense for their tomb to have any adverse effect on it."

Yet Finn could not shake the thought of the vast underground spaces beneath the castle and beneath this earth. Yet the tomb wasn't this far out. And there were no rooms beyond the tomb. Were there? He settled back against Rohan. He was just feeling off because of that stupid book that Hugues had shown him. He was glad he'd told Rohan about it. Instead of being alarmed by its contents, Rohan hadn't cared if he was a Death Mage or not.

I can't believe I'm getting upset about not *being a Death Mage! Wouldn't that be a good thing?* Finn asked himself. *It would mean my mother died of natural causes, not because I drained her life away. But no, I did do that. I am a Death Mage.*

What had truly scared Finn was the thought that if he *wasn't* a Death Mage then he and Rohan weren't meant to be together. That Marikoth hadn't been lying when he'd told Rohan that they were made for one another and not Finn and Rohan at all. Could something that looked like a Death Mage, could do magic like a Death Mage, but was something altogether darker and more dangerous exist? His head jerked to the right as he thought he saw the raven's tail feathers out of the corner of his eye.

"Finn? Everything okay?" Rohan asked.

"Yes, yes, of course, just eager to get there," Finn lied.

His jumpiness--and his earlier behavior with the storm against Hugues--were clearly worrying Rohan. Not that Finn could blame him. He truly wasn't himself today.

"Well, we are here! I see the little tent that Serxio put together." Leonid's arm shot out towards a structure in the center of a gray field with a white pointed top and flapping sides.

"I told them to make it look romantic!" Serxio gushed, pushing his head up next to Finn's as he tried to get a better look at the staff's handiwork. "Oh, my. Well, that's… ah, maybe it looks better closer up?"

"Romantic?" Leonid sounded dubious. "More like a refugee tent in this dreary place."

"It's romantic! I mean… once you're inside and can't see the dead field," Serxio admitted. "I thought with the sun out it would be cheerier, but it's quite… uhm, well, quite."

"It's very nice, Serxio," Finn tried to assuage the young lord's feelings. "But, regardless, Rohan and I won't be using it for anything today."

He shivered and drew closer to Rohan as a cold wind blew upon them. Rohan's jaw clenched tightly too as he pulled back on the reins to stop the horses. They stopped, but reluctantly. Finn saw their ears flickering and their feet shifting beneath their powerful bodies.

"I don't like this place," Leonid whispered under his breath.

Finn was in agreement. The horses also seemed to feel the same way.

Rohan jumped down from the cart before coming around to help Finn get down as well. He grasped Finn around the waist and lifted him to the ground. Finn hadn't needed the assistance, but he enjoyed the contact nonetheless. Serxio and Leonid hopped down on their own. They all four stood there, clustered together with the horses, and stared out at the field like birds on a line surveying an icy, black pond that beckoned to freeze their feathers and drag them under.

The land was mostly flat, except for a slight swelling in the very center of the field. It reminded Finn of a pregnant woman just starting to show. But that was the only hint of life about the place. Finn got down on his haunches and picked up a handful of earth. The soil was gray and powdery. The wind easily blew it away. Finn would have never thought this land held any life whatsoever, but according to Rohan it had once given birth to cabbages, carrots and potatoes. Finn dumped the rest of

the dirt back onto the ground and stood up, dusting his hands off.

"Do you sense any life here, Finn?" Rohan asked softly, almost as if afraid to speak too loudly and disturb something.

"No, not even the echo of it." Finn turned towards him. He couldn't hide his alarm. "Rohan, even though Tanglewood was barren this year, there was still *something* left in the soil. A little *spark*. But there's nothing here. It's as if this isn't soil at all but… but…"

"Grave matter," Serxio whispered. He had his arms tucked tightly around himself.

"What's that, Serxio?" Leonid asked.

"Oh, it's nothing. Just a story I heard as a boy from my nurse," Serxio said, flashing a smile that failed to reach his eyes. "It was a scary story. I loved being frightened back then. This place just reminds me of it."

"What's the story, Serxio?" Rohan asked.

It was clear that he didn't want to go out into the field either and was delaying by asking about this scary story. Finn was glad to delay as well. He sent his senses questing outwards for any life as Serxio began to talk.

Serxio let a breath whistle out between his teeth before he said, "There was a small village where a girl had died a violent death. Her married lover had strangled her because she was with child."

"A typical tale that's all too true," Leonid said with a press of his lips.

"Yes, indeed. The lover was not punished in the least as he was wealthy and noble while she was poor and a servant. But it went further than it usually did. Because, to add insult to injury, the girl wasn't even allowed to be buried in the local cemetery. People accused her of being a--a well, *loose* woman, you know."

Finn's eyes narrowed. "And the man who was *married* and a *killer* was *what* in their eyes?"

"Oh, you know, probably revered." Serxio shrugged though his expression was grim. "In any event, a week after the girl was buried in some secret, shameful place, a child from the village goes missing."

"Someone related to the lover?" Rohan guessed.

But Serxio shook his head. "No connection to him whatsoever. She was playing in the woods and then she was *gone*. It's a tragedy, of course, but the woods were dangerous and children who strayed too far learned that right quick in the North. So while there was sadness there wasn't alarm or anything like that. Children were reminded to stay out of the woods and keep to town. But then the next week comes and another child goes missing."

Another chill wind blew over them and Finn huddled closer to Rohan. Serxio's gaze was out on the field, though Finn didn't think he was seeing it.

"This child was playing just outside the backdoor of his house. His mother had spoken to him moments before he disappeared. Mere moments. She turned her head for a minute, less really, before looking back but he was gone. The ball he had been playing with was still rolling on the grass. But he

was nowhere to be seen," Serxio said.

"Gods," Leonid growled. "Surely, they contacted the Guard or their local constabulary!"

"They did. But all that was found was a single bare footprint in some mud just outside the yard's gate. It looked to be a woman's footprint. But there were no others that they could follow," Serxio explained. "This was chalked up to some lonely woman who stole a child, because she couldn't have one or some such nonsense. Hardly comforting for the parents of the first child or the second. But, again, the villagers chose to believe that the disappearances weren't connected and there was no danger. Though it was said that they locked their doors and closed their windows tightly after dark."

"They really thought some random woman in bare feet came and stole a kid?" Leonid asked in disbelief. "I swear these local officials are fools! No proper training in investigative work! You've got to have some common sense as well, but give some country bumpkin a uniform and instead of living up to it, we have to live down whatever he does."

"You wouldn't have let things lay, I know, Leonid, but it was as if they were all in denial," Serxio explained with a grimace. "Well, the next week came and a *third* child was taken. Right out of her bed. The shutters on her window were pried open and left splintered on the ground outside. Despite the racket this must have made, no one heard anything. But there were more bare footprints this time as it had freshly rained the night before and everywhere was mud."

"Please tell me they followed them!" Leonid looked apoplectic at the thought of such poor investigative work.

"They did. They led to the forest. The villagers fanned out and searched all day. But they only found a bit of bloody clothing from the second child and nothing else," Serxio said.

"Was there a fourth child taken?" Finn's voice was small as he thought of the terror that must have laid like a thick blanket on the village at that point.

"An attempt was made, but it was thwarted," Serxio explained. "A child claimed that a lady gestured for him to leave his house and come with her into the woods. His mother caught him just as he was sneaking out of the house. Finally, the villagers couldn't deny what was happening. There was an uproar. They demanded the noble--you know, the bastard who had killed the poor girl in the beginning of this story--do *something*. Anything."

"He hadn't offered to assist before?" Rohan's voice was soft and filled with disgust.

"Peasant children die all the time. What was it to him?" Serxio shrugged again. "But this time he put on a good show of caring. He was a hunter. A relatively skilled one. So he decided he would track this child killer down. Though it was ostensibly for the peasants he was doing this, everyone knew he was just excited to have a hunt with a purpose."

"And did he?" Finn asked, sounding rather breathless as dread was crawling up his spine and threatening to strangle him. The field and the story were mixing together into something else.

"He did. In a way. See, he was in the village on his horse, trotting back and forth with his sword and his bow, being the big man." Serxio waved a hand through the air. Leonid snorted. "And that's

when he saw the woman the last child had seen himself. She was standing between two trees. Just standing there. Almost as if she was waiting for him. He took off after her, dug his heels into the stallion's flanks and surged forward. The villagers ran after him, but he soon outpaced them."

"They didn't see what happened to him, but they heard it. A cry from the man. A shriek from the horse. And then silence," Serxio continued. "The villagers almost turned back at that silence, but they forced themselves to continue on. Because if he was truly gone, they had no chance against the woman. So they crept forward until they found the glade."

There shouldn't be power in the word "glade" especially in Finn's estimation. But it was coming out of Serxio's mouth. It was as if he was speaking an obscene or sacred word. Somewhere between the two.

"There was a grave in this little glade in the woods. The earth was still uncovered by vegetation or even fallen forest matter like leaves or twigs. In fact, the gray earth appeared bleached of life. Like nothing had ever grown there or would grow there," Serxio explained.

All of them looked at the field before them. It was exactly how this field looked.

"Was the earth disturbed? Where was the man and the horse?" Leonid asked.

"The grave was completely covered. There was no sign that anyone had dug *into* the ground. Or dug *out* of it," Serxio added. "It was undisturbed. No hoof prints or footprints. Nothing. The only sign that something was amiss was that one of the villagers saw the edge of the nobleman's cloak sticking out of the ground."

"I suppose if that earth was quicksand, you would have told us," Rohan guessed.

"Perhaps it acted like it. For the villagers--though they were terrified--realized that this was where the source of their troubles lay and so they started to dig," Serxio explained. "They dug furiously as the sun was fast dipping down past the horizon and none of them wanted to be there in the dark."

"What did they find?" Finn asked.

"The horse first. It's head was nearly straight down as if it were leaping into a pit. They had to dig around it. The soil was looser the further down they went, almost like a bottle with a narrow neck but a bulbous bottom." Serxio grimaced. "They found the children next. They were all huddled together, holding onto one another even though they had clearly died weeks apart. Think of the horror that would cause you to curl against a dead body! And then there was the nobleman and the young woman he'd killed. She had her hands around his throat, holding him down there, until he had suffocated, too."

Silence fell for a long moment.

"The villagers, of course, did what villagers do best in these times. They burned all of it. Tossed cooking oil down there and burned everything to ash," Serxio said with a faint smile. "But the soil--the *grave matter*--in that glade never recovered. In fact, it seemed to *grow*. Every year by half an inch or so. Killing trees and bushes. Animals stayed away. And, of course, children still went missing in

the nearby villages."

"Even though they'd destroyed the woman's body? I assume she was the cause of all of this?" Rohan asked, sounding sad. "Her revenge?"

"You would think it would have ended once the nobleman was dead. Indeed, my nurse said that the burning *should* have stopped it. So that meant only one thing: they must not have gotten all of them," Serxio answered.

"But they did! You said all the children were there. The nobleman. The young woman. Even the horse!" Leonid cried.

"The baby," Finn breathed, understanding coming over him.

Serxio nodded. "Yes, the *child*. They did not check to see if the child was still in the mother's womb before they torched the bodies. And my nurse said it must not have been, because the grave matter was still there. Still growing. And wherever you see it, something dead and cursed remains."

UNNATURAL HARVEST

"I really wish you hadn't told us that story, Serxio," Leonid remarked as they all turned back towards the field that looked to be *all* grave matter.

"I think I agree with you, but the milk is spilt." Serxio drew his coat tighter around himself. "I've now frightened myself. Oh, dear."

"Well, there would have to be a lot of dead, cursed things to affect a whole field like this," Finn pointed out.

"And they'd have to be all together. Like laying right beside each other under the earth," Serxio agreed with a nod. "Like hundreds of them. Maybe more."

"A lot more," Leonid muttered.

"Not helping, gentlemen," Rohan replied dryly.

They all continued to stare at the field with none of them moving. Rohan cleared his throat and all three of them snapped towards him. He gave what he hoped was a confident smile and brought his hands together in front of him, rubbing them as if eager to start work. He had been eager, but *now*…

What am I thinking? That if Finn and I add life to this field that a whole army of the undead will awake? Preposterous! I should not have let Serxio tell that story.

But Rohan realized that this was *exactly* what he was thinking. He felt that this earth should not be disturbed. Yet he had no good reason for saying that other than a touch of the nerves and a scary story that had nothing to do with this land. Besides, Roslyn and the servants had already tilled the field. There was nowhere else prepared for their experiment. So unless he wanted to have them all ride back to the castle, task undone, and have the servants do yet more work in another field, they had to use this one. And really, it was a fine field. Perfectly fine. He rubbed his hands together again, forcing that smile to stay put.

"So, Finn, do we plant some seeds first and then put life into the soil or do we try and get the soil to a fertile state and then do some planting?" Rohan asked.

He'd intended his voice to be hearty, but he quickly modulated it lower as his voice seemed too loud and jangled everyone's nerves. And he worried that someone–or something–else might hear him and stir.

This is ridiculous. I am being ridiculous!

He had ridden into battles with less nerves than he had at this moment. Besides, Lightbringer was strapped to his back. That sword could kill anything that might come after them, including an army of the dead.

"Uhm, well, with Tanglewood, we'd sort of do a combination. But I think with the land being so poor here that we should try to energize it a bit before planting any of the seeds," Finn suggested.

Rohan could see the reluctance in Finn to touch this land either. But again the practicalities of going somewhere else reared their head. His pride and sense of self was stronger than any innocuous fear. He tried to imagine the field full of life and maybe even green growing things sticking out of the earth. He would feel quite foolish at experiencing this earlier fear. He forced himself to focus on that.

"All right. Where shall we stand? In the center on top of that slight rise or here?" Rohan grimaced as he heard the almost pitiful hope that "here" would be sufficient. He was no coward. None of them were. But they had waded into the undead more eagerly than they were to set foot in this field. He could see the same thing again in Finn's face too.

Serxio really shouldn't have told that story. Rohan's gaze swept the field again. Despite the brightness of the sun and the clean taste of the air, something was *wrong* about this spot. Something that inspired tales such as Serxio's. *It's only because the blight is so much worse here. That's the only reason it feels so forlorn and like a warning at the same time. This will be what all of Rirea is like in the future unless Finn and I stop it.*

But Finn came through and made the matter simple. The young man gave him a bright grin and said, "We would likely have better luck on the rise. We can see the whole field that way and spread out life more evenly."

"Yes, yes, we should give this our absolute best as it clearly needs it." Rohan turned to his two best friends. The leery looks on their faces quickly were hidden once they caught sight of him. But he said kindly, "Only Finn and I have to go into the field. You two can stay here."

"Absolutely not, my king. We go where you go. We won't stay on the road," Leonid said stoutly.

"If there were lots of undead things here I doubt we'd be safe on the road anyways," Serxio said honestly.

Rohan laughed and thumped his back. "Best to die together then?"

"Yes, my king. Though I would prefer that we don't die. Not for a long time. And then in our sleep."

"Good thoughts, Serxio. It will happen," Rohan said, but he realized as he said it that he was lying.

Finn was immortal and age would never touch him. Never frost his hair or wrinkle his flesh or thin his bones. And, according to Finn, Rohan was likely to live forever, because of the quickening of the Aeturnal blood in his veins. He did not want to think about what it would be like for them to stay the same age while Leonid and Serxio grew old and, eventually, died.

That is a long time from now, he thought and swallowed.

"I promise us all a good deal of wine and roast meat by the fire after this. How does that sound as a reward, Serxio?" Rohan asked.

A picnic lunch had been packed and was ready to be taken out, but there was no way they were eating here. Not in the cart or the tent. No matter if the fear dissipated, he couldn't imagine staying here any longer than he had to.

The foppish young lord perked up considerably. "Oh, yes, wine and beef with the mushroom sauce. Oh, yes, yes, yes. Let's get this done!"

Serxio strode ahead of all of them towards the rise, leading the way for the rest of them.

Leonid whispered to Rohan, "Clearly, the way to reach Serxio's courage is through his stomach."

Rohan just grinned and clapped Leonid's shoulder companionably. He then threaded the fingers of his nearest hand with Finn's and they all started out into the field. The dirt rose up in little gray puffs as they walked, dusting the fronts of their boots, dulling the shine and color. Finn was looking down at it with concern.

"It really is bad here, isn't it?" Finn asked him.

"Roslyn said that nothing has grown here in ten years." He grimaced. "But I admit that I didn't realize there was any spot in the kingdom--let alone one nearby--that was like *this*."

Again, the magnitude of the task ahead of them seemed mountainous. His earlier thoughts that day–that it would be easy to restore Rirea–were fading. It was one thing to bring a single rose garden back to life, but this field was a wholly other thing altogether. He had to push down despair. Though he was learning slowly about his powers, there was so much he did not know. Instinct could only get him so far, especially when faced with a land so damaged.

"We'll fix it. We have to." Finn nodded to his own statements as if to convince himself of them.

The rise wasn't that tall and it was so gradual that Rohan didn't even realize that they were at the top of it until Serxio called out.

"I believe we are here!" Serxio stuck a finger into the air and made a slow circle as if claiming all the land he could see for Rirea.

Rohan swept his gaze around the area and realized just how exposed they were. There was nothing anywhere around them. Not even boulders. He frowned. The skin between his shoulder blades was twitching as if there were unseen eyes upon him. Part of him asked if he truly thought that this was wise when every instinct in his body was to get away from here.

That's just nameless fear, isn't it? And even if there is something truly wrong with this place, Finn and my magic can heal it. I have to believe that.

"So, where do you want us?" Leonid asked as he and Serxio stood awkwardly beside him and Finn.

Finn gestured for them to go a few feet away. "Go over there. That gives Rohan and I enough space. We shouldn't face them, Rohan. I think it would be distracting."

"That sounds reasonable." Rohan nodded.

He definitely didn't need any distractions. When he and Finn made love, the magic just raced out of them in ever larger waves, but now that he was supposed to tap into it, he felt very *unmagical*. But Finn seemed to sparkle in the sunlight. He was a creature of magic for sure even if Rohan was just a luddite.

He took off Lightbringer and handed it to Leonid to hold for him. Finn was convinced that even when all the sword's runes were glowing that didn't mean it couldn't take on more power. Rohan rather agreed. He sensed *pockets* within it, untapped areas where magic could rest.

"We should touch the soil like we did with the rose bush, I think," Finn said after a moment's consideration.

Finn didn't know much more about magic than he did. Thalanil had refused to talk about his Death Magic, according to Finn, and the very few lessons he'd had from his father would not be helpful. But he'd restored Tanglewood year after year so maybe that knowledge and experience would be enough.

"I'll follow your lead," Rohan answered.

But Rohan only reluctantly lowered himself down on his haunches beside Finn. The urge to grab Finn's nearest hand and yank him to a standing position was so strong that he had to fist his one hand to stop himself.

Why isn't the fear lessening? Why is it growing like a drum beat becoming ever louder?

And yet, as he thought before, even if the field was *wrong* weren't they here to fix that? How could it become right if they weren't willing to heal it? He drew in a breath and centered himself. They were doing this. They were going to reclaim this as usable land for Rirea. If they could do that then nothing could stop them.

Picture this place filled with vegetables and grain. Think of how many it will feed, he reminded himself rather like a mantra.

Every act he'd ever taken had been made easier when he thought of how many people it would help. The more people it would be beneficial to, the less any personal distaste it had for him. Only choosing a life partner had not met this test. He'd held out for himself. But he'd been right to. For that was how he'd found Finn and there was not a better life partner than the Fae Prince, not for himself or for Rirea.

"What are you thinking, Finn?" Rohan asked.

Finn was weighing some of the soil in his palm and staring at it with concern again. He allowed it to dribble off the side of his hand before dusting his palms together.

"I could not bring this place back to life myself, but together… together maybe we can do it. No, I *know* we can. Are you ready, Rohan?" Finn turned his head to face him, a small smile on his lips.

Perhaps it was his imagination but Finn didn't sound ready or look ready. Yet Rohan nodded and said, "Of course. Together we can do anything."

And why did that sound foolhardy and arrogant rather than the resounding moment of affirmation it

was meant to?

Some places should not be disturbed, he thought, but immediately quashed that down. *This is my land. I will not let it lay fallow.*

Finn placed both of his hands palms down against the dry, lifeless soil. Rohan followed suit. It felt fine under his fingers, more like pencil shavings than good, rich earth. It was hard to imagine how one had become the other, let alone how it could turn back again.

"Let's close our eyes and seek out any life here first," Finn suggested. "Instead of going far, let's go deep. Maybe there's something lower that can be brought to the surface."

Again, Rohan nodded and allowed his eyelids to shut. But he almost immediately opened them and his head shot around to look over his shoulder.

"Rohan, what is it?" Finn asked, alarm tinting his voice.

Rohan didn't know, but he realized that his right hand had gone to where Lightbringer's hilt should have been. But it was in Leonid's hands. He quickly dropped his hand to his side. But his fingers curled like they would have around the hilt of the magical sword.

"Rohan?" Finn repeated his name.

"I'm sorry, Finn. I thought I heard… someone," he answered.

But was that true? No. He hadn't *heard* anyone. It was the sensation he had always gotten when there was danger near. An unseen foe. It had saved his life more than once. But the coast was clear. There was no one within eyeshot. And the fields around them were flat. He would have seen someone if there was someone to be seen. Serxio and Leonid were looking as well, but he could tell from their furrowed brows and worried expressions that they didn't see anything either.

"It truly is nothing," Rohan said with a weak smile. "Let's continue."

Finn nodded and shut his eyes again. Rohan hesitated a moment before doing the same. He lowered his hands into the earth. When they had done this to revive his grandmother's rose bush there had been a few faint threads of life left. He and Finn had simply gathered those and fed power into them, causing them to multiply and grow. But he didn't see any threads anywhere. He frowned and kept looking. He tried to remember how the soil had been in the rose garden. There had been a very faint overall blue glow. The glow of life. That had quickened, too, with their feeding of energy, but the earth here held no such glow.

Perhaps lower like Finn suggested, he thought. *Maybe some of the soil lower down might have some life in it.*

"Yes, lower," Finn murmured, his voice almost ghostly, as if he'd heard Rohan's thoughts. "We need to go lower."

Their hands were touching so perhaps Finn could hear his thoughts or maybe he had spoken out loud and hadn't realized. His senses sank lower into the earth. One foot. Two feet. Three feet. Five. Seven. Ten. Fifteen. Twenty. *Fifty*…

"Stop!" Finn's voice rang out full of alarm and yet *eagerness*. "Stop. Do you feel them?"

"Feel *them*?" Serxio's voice came over to Rohan's ears, nervous and wavering.

"I feel an… absence," Rohan's own voice sounded distant.

He no longer felt tightly packed soil, rocks or other stones below him. No, he felt an *absence*. An *opening*. A *yawning maw*.

"There's a cavern," Finn whispered, that strange mixture of emotions in his voice. Hope and fear. Desire and repulsion.

"Yes," Rohan agreed.

His eyes were tightly shut, but the blackness he saw behind them was not because he had shut out the weak sun with his eyelids. No, he was *in* the cavern. Some part of him was there. It was so dark. Velvety black. He was drifting like a dust mote down and down and down. There were no air currents to disrupt his fall. He was heading straight down…

And then he stopped drifting. He was touching something. Something blocked his way.

"We need to see. We need to *see*," Finn's voice was whispery, but had a power to it. A power of command.

Magic, he realized as the velvety darkness of the cavern was suddenly pierced by a bright, white light.

It was so bright that he squinted against it. The light tore the darkness to shreds. And then he saw them. All of them. Arranged in neat rows in sets of fifty. They were evenly spaced apart. And all of them were looking *up*.

The dust mote he had become had landed on the chin of a skeletal warrior. It's bony jaws were cracked open. It's eye teeth were abnormally pointed and extended far longer than they should have in any human or Fae mouth. The eye sockets were empty, dark, except for the reflected light that Finn had made. But as Rohan stared within them, he thought he saw another glow--an *independent* glow--start to build. He wrenched his gaze away. Except in the cavern, he was just a set of eyes. He wasn't anything else.

"The ground… Is it shaking? Why is it shaking?" Serxio asked, voice still high and tight.

Rohan felt the trembles beneath his feet. The glow in the skeleton's eyes was growing.

If we stay down here, they'll awake!

Rohan forced his eyelids to open. He gasped as if emerging from deep water and rocketed forwards, nearly face planting in the dirt.

"My king!" Leonid cried.

His Guard Captain attempted to get to him, but stumbled as the ground continued to shake. Rohan's gaze snapped to Finn. Finn's eyes were still closed. His hands were pressed hard against the earth. His lips were moving. He was saying something so low that Rohan couldn't hear. Again, the thought that this was *magic* crossed his mind. Finn's magic.

I've got to stop him! He mustn't wake them!

Rohan grasped Finn's shoulders. He shook him gently at first, but then more forcefully as Finn's

eyes remained stubbornly closed.

"Finn! FINN!" Rohan shouted. "Open your eyes! Don't wake them! Don't wake the dead!"

"The dead?!" Serxio squeaked as he crouched low on the ground as the world trembled beneath them.

"FINN, PLEASE!" Rohan cried.

Finn's eyelids shot open and, like him, Finn gasped and sucked in air as if he had been holding his breath. His gaze was wild and unfocused. The earth started to shake less and less before it went still.

"Finn!" Rohan shook him again.

Finn's gaze centered on him. Those green eyes blinked. He finally seemed to see Rohan.

"Rohan… what… it was so dark and… they were there! Did you see them?" Finn surged against him, clutching him. "The Dreadbrood! They're below us!"

Meanwhile, in the Empire...

RYLETH AGAIN OPENED her eyes and, once more, found herself still in the prison beneath Aymar. And, just like that first time, her head *hurt*. To say she was in pain was to say that water was wet. She *was* pain. Every part of her shrieked in agony. She closed her eyes once more, determined to find unconsciousness and hide from this cruelty. But then she heard a wolf whine and her eyelids shot open.

She had fallen onto the floor when the prison guard had attacked her. Her head was twisted away from the bars and she had fallen on her front so it took a long moment to turn her head towards the sound of the whine. Tyreon, King of the Wolves, stood outside her jail cell looking in on her with concern imprinted on that fluffy face.

"Tyreon," she said, her voice slurred. The spell the prison guard's cudgel had possessed clearly had some kind of paralytic effect that was just now wearing off. So when she said the wolf's name it was garbled. She swallowed hard and tried again, "Tyreon."

The King of the Wolves danced a little outside of her cell and she smiled. Or tried to. Her face felt half frozen. She reached towards the wolf, but then stopped herself as she realized if she touched the bars it would be back to unconsciousness she went and the pain she felt now would seem like a mere reflection of the agony she *would* feel. So she was shocked when Tyreon pushed his snout through the bars--without incident--and licked her fingers.

"How did you do that?" she asked, but it came out more like, "Hooos uuuu doooo thttttt?"

"You know that monster?" Thomas gasped.

She struggled to get to a sitting position. Once she managed it, she massaged her face, trying to get feeling into both sides of her mouth at least. She could feel the left side drooping a little, but it started to tingle more as she worked at it. Tyreon's black eyes followed her every move.

"The guards are going to see that… dog… wolf… whatever, and kill it," Thomas advised her.

Was he eager for that or warning her? Considering all the days he had likely spent alone, and in this hideous darkness, she wasn't sure. He had killed Emma readily enough.

When her mouth felt like it could form words and not have her drooling, she answered in her almost regular voice, "I'd pay to see them try."

He was near the front of his cell. She could see how threadbare and disgusting his clothes now were, revealing more of him than they covered. And what they revealed was skin and bones. Hardly any flesh at all. He was more than gaunt. Thomas was skeletal. In spite of herself, she felt a wave of pity for him.

What have we taught him here other than to lie and thieve and kill to save himself? Are we not as much to blame for his moral disintegration as he is? She wondered. *And even if he was bad when he got here, why did we not try to uplift him if we are so much better than humans?*

It was sad, but not somehow unexpected that she would think of these things *now* when her ability to actually make them come to pass was extinguished. But Tyreon was here. And the spells around the cage were either off or not affecting him.

"How did your--your *pet* get down here anyways?" Thomas demanded to know.

Both she and Tyreon turned jaundiced-eyed looks upon him at the description of Tyreon as a *pet*.

"This is Tyreon, King of the Wolves. He's no one's pet," she responded dryly. Tyreon made a nod as if in agreement then leaned in and licked her fingers again. "How did you get in here, though, Tyreon? The guards… did they let you pass?"

An impish look appeared upon the wolf's face and he danced a little. Clearly, if he'd been able to, he had a story to tell about that. She looked down the hallway. There was only one guard present at the table. His head was tilted back, mouth drooping up, and a faint whistling snore emanated from his nose and mouth. He was asleep.

"I'm so glad you're here, Tyreon. You see the predicament I'm in," she said.

His fluffy face was all somber again.

"Are you talking to the wolf?" Thomas asked.

There was a scraping sound as he moved yet closer to the bars to see Tyreon.

"Yes, and I need you to be *silent* so I can do so, Thomas," she retorted before turning her attention back fully to Tyreon. His snout was pressed fully through the bars, almost as if he was trying to squeeze through. She petted his nose and even dared brush her fingers along the metal. "The spell on the bars is gone. Did you do that, Tyreon?"

He gave her a wolfish grin.

"You have some kind of spell dampening effect, don't you? That's how you manage to open the Wall!" she realized with amazement.

He danced around in a circle, pleased that she understood and appreciated his greatness.

"That's one problem solved," she murmured.

With the spell gone, there was a chance she could get out of here. She reached for the magic

inside of her. It was there. Faint, but there. But she stopped herself. What if attacking the bars or door to her cell magically re-energized the spell? Or what if there was another spell on them that she had not yet divined that would activate if magic touched them? Perhaps it would be one that did not physically hurt the user, but would reflect their spells back upon them. She cautiously probed the bars with her magical senses. Yes, there was one! A powerful one that would have boomeranged her destruction spell right back at her, crushing her bones and then some.

"There's only one way out of this cell," she murmured to herself and then she said to Tyreon, "I need those keys that the guard has. Can you get them?"

Another wolfish dance and Tyreon moved like a shadow back down the aisle. His head was low and his body was even lower to the ground. Thomas craned his neck to watch also. But then he was snapping his eyes back to her.

"You need to let me out, too, Ryleth!" he hissed.

"Why would I do that, Thomas? You murdered Emma!" she hissed back, keeping her voice low. "You betrayed me and the others! And who knows what you did to get yourself in here this time!"

Immediately, she realized that her desire to do good towards Thomas had evaporated the first chance she had gotten to help him. But maybe that was because she saw the scheming look in his eyes, which was followed up by speech.

"If you don't, I'm going to yell and wake that guard!" Thomas threatened.

"You wouldn't!" But even as she said it, she knew he would.

She glanced towards Tyreon. He was only five feet from the guard. If Thomas yelled now and woke him, the likelihood of the guard seeing Tyreon was one-hundred percent and a fight would break out. Even if Tyreon won, it would cause too much noise and more guards might come down to investigate. No, she had to keep things quiet and calm. Thomas met her gaze and opened his mouth to yell.

"All right! All right! I'll let you out," she promised.

"And you'll keep your word?" he demanded.

Tyreon was gently grasping the ring of keys on the guard's belt with his teeth.

"Yes! I will keep my word! Now hush," she demanded.

Thomas not only went silent, but he kept himself utterly still as Tyreon wended his way back towards them with the keyring in his mouth. Ryleth held her breath as Tyreon finally stopped outside of her cell. She reached through the bars, still careful not to touch them, and took the keyring from the wolf's mouth. It was slightly wet with his saliva and she grimaced, but then thinking of what she'd likely been touching on the floor of her cell, she decided wolf saliva was likely the cleanest thing in here.

She slowly rose to her feet. Her gaze flickered down towards the still sleeping guard as she chose the first key on the ring. There were three keys and any one of them looked capable of opening the door. She very carefully selected the first and slipped it into the lock. There was a mumbling sound

from the guard. Her head shot towards him. The guard smacked his lips and his head lolled a bit, but he didn't open his eyes. She finally let out the breath she'd been holding.

She tried to turn the key. There was a faint *click* as metal contacted metal, but the key didn't move the tumblers. Another glance down the aisle showed the guard's eyes still closed. Carefully, she pulled the key out and selected the second one on the ring. She made sure the keys didn't jingle against one another before slowly inserting the second. She turned it. *Click!*

"It's got to be the last one!" Thomas groaned. "Why does it always have to be the last one?"

"Quiet," she mouthed at him more than said.

Sweat had broken out on her upper lip and forehead. Her fingers felt slippery, too, and the second key slipped from her fingers and *jingled* against the other two. She caught them and stopped the jangling. Another frantic look down the hallway. The guard was making more noises. His right hand lifted and scratched his nose. He was waking up.

Swallowing hard, Ryleth selected the final key. Tyreon whined. Thomas groaned. Her breathing increased into an almost pant as she slid the key home into the lock and turned. *Click!* She was stunned. The key didn't turn! It wasn't turning! How was that possible? There were three keys and she'd tried them all? Had Tyreon chosen the wrong keyring? Or maybe some spell words needed to be said to release the lock? She turned it hard again and again.

Click!

Click!

CLICK!

The guard's eyelids started to open. She saw Thomas' frantic glances between her and the guard. She knew from one glance at his wretched face that he was considering calling out to the guard to report her now that the keys had proved useless. See? He was a *good* prisoner! He had stopped the *bad* prisoner from escaping and–The key turned!

There was *screech* and *clank* as the key turned all the way in the lock and the tumblers cranked upwards. The guard was turning his head, having heard the familiar sounds of an opening cell. Ryleth was desperately trying to swing the door open–*screeeeeeech!*---and prepared to defend herself from him. Maybe a silencing spell so he couldn't call the other guard! Or maybe she should knock him unconscious!

She stepped out into the aisle as she scraped for her magic and the guard's mouth began to open as he saw her, likely to say, "Hey! What's this then?" But he did not get out a syllable as a huge, white, furry body jumped upon him sending him flying backwards. His head struck the wall and down he went. Unconscious or dead. Ryleth found she didn't quite care. He'd enjoyed hurting her and he'd clearly starved Thomas. Whatever they'd done they hadn't deserved that! Tyreon turned around and wagged his tail at her.

"Good boy!" she told him and started hustling down the aisle.

"You're going to let me out, aren't you?" Thomas' voice quavered.

The look of desperation in his eyes hurt to see. They looked out at her from behind long, oily bangs. His eyes were sunken in his cheeks. It was like a death's head staring back at her.

"Yes, yes, of course," she found herself saying with a stab of shame in her heart.

Her people had done this to him. No matter what he had done, this shouldn't have been his fate. Did Thalanil *know* how his prisoners were treated? Did he even know that Thomas was a prisoner here? It was a small thing compared to everything the Fae king was up against, but she would tell him about it, show him Thomas as an exhibit of how things needed to change, no matter what.

The key turned more easily in Thomas' door now that she was standing in front of the lock rather than reaching around from inside. The door swung open and she stepped aside for Thomas to come out. But he remained there for a moment, licking his lips, with eyes flickering towards the bars.

"Is the magic gone?" he asked even as they both saw her hands on the cell door.

"No, not gone, but not activated. You should be fine. The key does the same thing Tyreon does," she explained. "It's safe to come out."

She heard the *tick* of impatient claws by the exit of the prison. Tyreon knew that they needed to get away. She held her frustration in check, though, as Thomas slowly took step after shuffling step from the cell.

"How long have you been in there?" she asked when he had finally exited it fully.

His shoulders had slumped in relief. "I don't know. How long has it been since we arrived at Aymar? Tela had me imprisoned right after that."

"So her loyalty to you only lasted as long as the ride into the city?" Ryleth asked, feeling justified in her dislike of her former apprentice.

"She was never my friend. But Fae never really are. They're only good to you so long as they need something." Thomas glared at her from behind his filthy bangs.

Her mouth opened to say something cutting about humans, but she stopped herself. This was not the way to show him that not all Fae were as he thought.

"Come, Tyreon is waiting for us," she said.

The two of them practically ran down the aisle. Thomas was breathing hard when they reached the fluffy King of the Wolves, but he didn't complain. There was a staircase going up ahead of them. At the top was a door. She could see daylight streaming in around the edges.

"How did you get in here?" she wondered at Tyreon again as the wolf let her take the lead.

Tyreon brought up the rear, using his large head to herd them both up the stairs even as Thomas huffed and puffed. He likely hadn't been allowed outside to walk outside or to take the air since he'd been imprisoned. And he was clearly weakened from lack of food.

When they reached the top, Ryleth put her right ear against the heavy wooden door and listened. At first, all she could hear was Thomas' panting and the swish of Tyreon's tail. Despite the danger, the King of the Wolves apparently was enjoying this. She closed her eyes and concentrated while she gathered power inside of herself.

She wanted to know what was on the other side of this door. Her magic would show her. Images began to flicker across her mind's eye. Two torches on either side of the door. The door itself was at the end of a long hallway, separated from the royal quarters, of course, and all the courtiers, too. She expected to see guards on either side of the door, but there were none. She sensed servants moving about nearby, but no one that would be directly there when they opened the door.

She was surprised at this, but then realized that she and Thomas were not high profiled detainees. She was just a backwater priestess and Thomas was a human. How many guards would it take to keep them inside Aymar? Not a one, really. Without Tyreon's help, they would have still been languishing down there with no hope of escape. She pulled back from the door to face a questioning Thomas and Tyreon.

"No more guards. The hallway is empty. Servants nearby but we should be able to sneak past them," Ryleth summarized. "I need to get to Finn and Rohan, which means I need to get to the Wall–"

"*We* need to get there," Thomas clarified. "I'm getting out of this bloody Empire and never returning!"

She nodded. She thought of her people. There was no chance she could get to them without being seen and recaptured. Right now, they were just considered refugees. She hoped that the people who were attempting this coup would ignore them. Her presence with them was the only thing that would draw attention to them so she needed to stay away.

"I would like to bring the horses, but going to the stables seems unwise. We'll just have to walk," she said with a frown as she took in Thomas' attire, which consisted of rags and his stick-thin legs.

"I can make it," he ground out as if worried she was still going to leave him behind.

"I'm sure. But mounts would be better," she said.

"Well, if wishes were horses, we'd have a herd. But we don't so let's go," Thomas urged.

She nodded, turned around and slowly opened the door. The clean, white stone hallways of Aymar were revealed *sans* guards. She let out a breath that her magic had not failed her. Thomas stumbled out into the hallway, blinking and swaying slightly, as he saw sunlight coming in from several mullioned windows. She felt that stab of shame go through her again. She lightly touched his wrist. He wrenched away from her, but he was refocused.

"Which way?" he asked.

She looked at Tyreon. "Can you take us out the safest way?"

"And the quickest," Thomas muttered.

The wolf immediately began to lead them down hallways at a fast, but doable pace. His tail was like a flag ahead of them. He made so many turns that she was completely lost herself, but Tyreon seemed to know exactly where he was going. He stopped them several times from going down a hallway just as a servant turned down in front of them. Without him, once more, Ryleth thought that they should not have survived.

"I think I know where we are," she said softly. "By the Wyvern Tower!"

There was an exit to the garden right there that would lead them through Thalanil's private sanctuary and out into the city. Tyreon's tongue lolled out in happiness that she understood what a good boy he was being. But suddenly he stood stock still. She practically ran into him.

"What's wrong with him?" Thomas asked.

Unlike those times with the servants, Tyreon was rigid. His tail had stopped wagging. Both ears were pricked. He suddenly lifted his head up towards the Wyvern Tower. His eyes were wide. With a low growl, he retreated from the base of the steps. His hackles rose and he suddenly turned and dashed towards the door. He whined and scratched at it.

"What in the hells is up there that he's so frightened of?" Thomas breathed, eyes widening under this mass of oily, dirty hair.

Ryleth thought of sneaking up there to use the Luminus to contact Finn, but a wave of *something* cold and wrong drifted down the stairs and had Ryleth's shoulders twitching. Going up there was dangerous. Going up there would lead to death.

"I don't know." Ryleth drew her arms tight around herself. "But we need to get out of here and far away from it. Far, far away."

"You don't have to tell me twice!"

Both of them joined the anxious wolf by the door. They opened it and ran out into light, air, and, hopefully, freedom. Tyreon led them through the garden towards that back way into the palace. They met no guards. They found no one at all. The sense of emptiness, of absence, was strong.

Tyreon's ears were up, but back as if he wanted to hunker as low as possible so he wouldn't be seen. It was unnerving that the King of the Wolves was acting as if the palace was no longer safe for him either. He stopped by a thick copse of trees and made a low bark. Thomas and she froze until there was a bark back followed by a series of higher pitched yips. Out of the copse came another wolf–as black as night and almost as large as Tyreon–with several pups tumbling after.

"Is this your family, Tyreon?" Ryleth gasped as the King of the Wolves licked and nosed each pup only to end by pressing the side of his fluffy head against the large black wolf's head.

"He's getting out of here. Taking the whole family," Thomas remarked and looked more alarmed if that was possible.

"But he serves Thalanil. He wouldn't just abandon his king!" she protested.

But that seemed to be exactly what Tyreon was doing. She thought of what the guard had said to her, about her serving the *false* king. But if Thalanil was the false king, who was the real one?

The conspiracy against Thalanil has grown far larger than can be hidden any longer if the guards are in on it. Has Aymar fallen? Is it no longer safe for the king? What about my people?

Her head shot back towards the palace. She thought of Jani. What would happen to her in there? She must have moved unconsciously backwards. Thomas' bony arm shot out.

"Which way?" Thomas asked. "Which way back to Rirea?"

She reminded herself that by going back all she was doing was risking everyone's lives, including

her own. There was no way she could save them without potentially bringing everything down on their heads. For once, she sincerely hoped that her people were ignored and forgotten. That would be the best thing for them.

Gritting her teeth, she said, “This way.”

Ryleth, Thomas, Tyreon, his mate and the pups all stole out of Aymar and headed for the Wall.

WAITING IN THE DARK

Finn stared at the back wall of the Aeturnal and Bonded One's tomb. The scholars were working all around him, having quiet conversations about this or that esoteric subject, which he could hardly understand, but none of them had any information on the Dreadbrood. But, then again, they had hardly scratched the surface of the knowledge in this room.

Or the rooms beyond it. I know there's a way through. A secret passage.

Finn went back to pushing stones and running his hands along the bookshelves, but nothing budged, let alone revealed a secret entrance to a room filled with monsters. If that was, in fact, what he and Rohan found out in the dead field. But even as he tried to offer himself other reasonable, rational explanations for what he and Rohan had seen with their minds' eyes, he knew it was true. The Dreadbrood were sleeping beneath Rirea.

It can't be a coincidence they're here either. If I'm Death's Chosen… No, no, I'm just a Death Mage! I'm not some creature created by the God of Death to lead his army!

The thought that being *just* a Death Mage would seem a better alternative was not lost on Finn. Being a Death Mage had appeared a fate worse than any, but now? Now he didn't know what to think.

The books from the shelves before him had already been removed, cataloged and carefully listed as to where each was in order. This was the shelf where Marikoth had stolen some of the volumes.

Were those volumes about the Dreadbrood? Because an undead army would be the one thing that a Death Mage couldn't drain and easily defeat. A living army is just fuel for a Death Mage's magic, but not an undead one.

He thought about how his own experiences with the undead in the catacombs had taught him this. He wondered how Marikoth had created those creatures. Christopher was certain it did not involve using Death Magic, but the undead he'd fought were not like the creatures in the engraving above his head currently or the creatures he and Rohan had glimpsed underneath the field. No, these new undead were lumbering and slow and unskilled. The Dreadbrood were terrifying warriors who could wield blades and bows, axes and maces, shields and armor as easily as the living breathed.

Perhaps these new undead are but a novice's attempt to recreate the Dreadbrood. I could easily

see Marikoth reading about them and wanting to experiment. Not just to turn people into shambling monsters, but also to figure out how to destroy them. Almost as if he fears someone using such an army against him.

Finn ran his fingers along the top of the bookshelf, trying to find a lever or something to indicate a way to shift the built-in shelves. He had to get up on his tiptoes to reach, but even so, his fingers were barely brushing the top of the shelf.

"Here, let me help you," Tearlach said in his right ear.

Finn froze, shocked at how the Achuvien king had simply snuck up behind him, and then he froze again when Tearlach put his hands around Finn's waist and effortlessly lifted him up. Not only could Finn now reach the very back of the top of the shelves, but he could see all along it as well.

"What are you looking for other than dust and cobwebs?" Tearlach asked as Finn got over his shock at being touched and felt along the top of the bookcase.

"Evidently, nothing," Finn sighed. "Put me down, please."

Tearlach set him down just as easily as he had lifted Finn up. Finn turned around to him. The man was dressed all in black and looked as much like a human version of the raven Finn followed more than anything else. Tearlach cocked his head to the side, regarding Finn back.

"Where is my Rohan? Shouldn't he be letting you stand on his shoulders to see high things?" Tearlach asked.

"*Rohan*," Finn was firm in *not* including the "my" with that, "is in the throne room. The Queen of Sultane is arriving soon, if she has not already."

Tearlach's eyebrows drew together. "And you are not by Rohan's side to greet her? I am surprised that he has not brought out his mother's old throne so you can sit upon it!"

Finn blushed. While Tearlach might tease about Rohan being *his*, he clearly thought that Rohan and Finn were more than just lovers.

"He wished me to be there," Finn admitted.

After the failure with the field, a messenger had arrived on a fast horse with a message for Rohan. Finn could tell that Rohan was still reeling from what they'd discovered as he'd read the note. He was hardly alone. Serxio was lifting up one foot then the other very high in the air as if he did not even want to touch the ground where the Dreadbrood was. Leonid stared intently at the ground, his eyes flickering every which way, and kept a firm hand on his sword hilt. He clearly expected the undead to start rising up from the dirt.

And if Rohan hadn't stopped me, maybe they would have. I wanted… I wanted… to take my place. Finn blinked at that strange thought. *What place do I think I have with those monsters? I'm not like them!*

So softly as to almost not be real, Finn thought he heard, *You lead them, Death's Chosen. You lead them into war carrying my banner.*

I don't serve you! Finn cried.

Out of the corner of his eye, he thought he saw raven wings again, but when he jerked his head towards them, there was nothing there. Of course, the raven was avoiding him! It had hidden the fact that the Dreadbrood was right beneath their feet. All this time, it had known what was wrong with Rirea, but had said nothing. Had done nothing. Had let them all wonder. It claimed to be the God of Death. It wanted his fealty, likely his worship, since it was a god.

Why would I serve you when you conceal the truth of what ails Rirea? Finn asked. *Why would I worship a god who knows what I need and does not answer despite it being within that god's power?*

He actually knew the answer to that. People worshiped gods in the hopes those gods would help them, but also, so that those same gods wouldn't destroy them. And hadn't the fall of the Aeturnals shown that the God of Death was more the latter? Finn grimaced. But his anger and concern were deflected by Rohan speaking.

"It seems we are to have a visitor today. The Queen of Sultane is but a few hours ride away." Rohan handed the message back to the rider. "Return to the castle and let the staff know that rooms are to be made up to receive her Highness. Also, a feast–such as we can offer–should be prepared. We will greet her in the throne room."

The rider bowed low and departed as fast as he had arrived. Rohan turned back to them. He looked worried.

"She's come far faster than I thought she would. That means that things must be worse in Sultane than we guessed for she must have left the moment she got my uncle's note to arrive here now." Rohan rubbed his chin. "I had hoped today's endeavor would bring some hope for everyone. But…"

They all stared at the grave matter that covered this field in silence for long moments. Finn kept wanting to disbelieve what they'd found. But the look of this ground, the way he was both drawn and repelled, told him it was real. This was all terribly real.

"If the Dreadbrood is truly beneath Rirea that would explain the draining of life here. But in Sultane? That's ages away. Surely, all of Rirea would be this grave matter if the Dreadbrood's effects extended so far," Leonid pointed out.

It was a good point. A very good point. So that meant the fact that the Dreadbrood was here likely wasn't the only cause for the decay here. And the undead army certainly couldn't be the cause of the over abundance of life in the Empire. The idea that the Empire–of which Sultane and Bolan were parts–needed to be reunited under Aeturnal rule was gaining more strength. That presented so many problems of its own.

"Is there really an army of undead monsters just beneath our feet?" Serxio was pale as milk and still moving his feet up and down.

Rohan glanced at Finn. His expression was grim. "I saw… something unnatural."

Finn laced his fingers together tightly in front of him. He wasn't sure why exactly, but he felt responsible for this.

If I'm Death's Chosen, of course the Dreadbrood is here. It's waiting for me. That's what the raven is trying to tell me. And what I don't want to hear even if it is the truth. That thought came unbidden and caused Finn to swallow hard.

"I saw it, too. I more than saw it. I *felt* it. They looked exactly like the engraving in the tomb," Finn added, but then he shook himself. Maybe he was wrong. He hoped he was wrong. He shouldn't say this. "Of course, we can't be sure–"

"You seemed very certain, Finn," Serxio pointed out.

Finn nodded after a moment. He felt like he was standing on the edge of a precipice and a slight wind could blow him off into the abyss. "Yes, I suppose I did. I suppose I *am*."

Rohan put an arm around his shoulders. "Are you all right? Were you hurt at all? It just startled me, but–"

"No, I'm not hurt." Far from it. If he was honest with himself, he was actually invigorated by the experience. His skin tingled. He felt waves of magic flowing through him. "I just can't believe it's here and that it's been here for… how long has it been here, do you think?"

Rohan shook his head in uncertainty. "The Aeturnals built this place unknown ages ago. The Dreadbrood must have been here then for them to–to *store* the army down there. They must be in rooms attached to the tomb. Ones we simply haven't found yet."

"You think there's a–a connection between Reave Castle and the monsters? There's like a door or something?" Serxio was practically crawling into Leonid's arms as he continually tried not to touch the ground.

"There must be. Rohan is right. The Aeturnals must have known about them." Finn crouched down again and lightly placed his hand on top of the soil. "The rooms they are in had the same architecture. I thought it was just a cavern at first, but it isn't."

"I suppose the question becomes were they stored here or were they imprisoned here," Rohan murmured.

"I didn't sense any magical bindings or anything on them or the room," Finn admitted. But was he good enough with his powers to be sure? Probably not, but he felt that was true nonetheless. "They just need someone to wake them up." And against his will, he said, "The Death's Chosen."

"Even that title is frightening!" Serxio shivered.

"It is." Finn got to his feet again and dusted his hands off. "We should return to the castle. I don't think it would be safe to energize this ground. I'm afraid your tent won't get any use, Serxio."

"Thank the gods! I wouldn't allow you and Rohan to so much as exchange a kiss in this place now! Undead monsters are *not* romantic!" Serxio proclaimed.

Rohan tucked Finn against him. "I agree about monsters not being romantic, but I must kiss Finn whenever I can." Saying that, he kissed Finn's temple. "Now, let us get out of here."

"You don't have to ask twice!" Serxio was already hotfooting it to the cart.

It wasn't until they were on the cart and halfway back to the castle that Finn brought up both of

them greeting the Queen of Sultane.

"I think it would be best if you were to meet her alone first, and then you should introduce her to me over dinner or something," Finn offered.

Rohan frowned. "Why do you want this?"

"It is not that I'm being shy," Finn assured him. "But I think… People have ideas about Fae. If she sees me by your side, greeting her as if I am part ruler of Rirea–"

"I would have you as an *equal* ruler with me," Rohan reminded him.

Finn blushed. "And I would give you everything of mine as well. But right now, I am the Crown Prince of the Empire of the Eclipse Throne and she likely sees me as her enemy. At least as the enemy that she was coming to discuss fighting."

Rohan's mouth flattened. "Yes, because of my uncle."

"Indeed. And if I'm right there, it might appear that I've…" Finn struggled to find the words, "Well, people think Fae can use magic to charm others. I'm sure it's actually true. Not that I can do that or would do that. Most definitely not to you. But she would think it or worry it was the case."

"I understand, Finn. You're afraid that she will believe you've enchanted me and that I'm not speaking as myself but as your puppet?" Rohan asked.

Finn nodded. "Yes. She doesn't know that you're the Heir to House Aeturnal. So while you're Fae too, she has no idea."

"True." Rohan sighed. "You're right. Unfortunately, I should greet her alone. Though I will be missing you terribly. And it makes me all the more eager to make our connection more official."

Finn flushed hotter. "I know. We will find a way to make that happen, Rohan. One step at a time though."

They'd kissed and the cart had taken them home.

Finn did not explain all of this to Tearlach. He just said, "Rohan is the sole ruler of Rirea. For now."

Tearlach tossed back his head and laughed. "Ah, that *for now* was so regal! So Fae! I love it! You have a bit of a conqueror in you despite your soft looks."

"I only want what's best for the people. I don't care if I am the ruler or not," Finn stated.

Tearlach shrugged. "The only way you can ensure the people are taken care of the way you think they ought to be is to be the ruler."

"You are likely right," Finn sighed.

"I am definitely right. But I am actually here not to give such good advice. I hear you were looking for me," Tearlach said agreeably after a moment's consideration. "I was out hunting."

Finn's forehead furrowed as he thought of the dead fields and forests. "Is there anything to hunt?"

"There is always something to hunt." Tearlach gave him a rather wolfish smile.

Finn decided not to investigate that further. "Yes, well, I was hoping that you would translate something for me," Finn said as he felt inside his robes for the book that Hugues had showed him that

morning. He handed the slender volume to Tearlach.

The Achuvien king took the book with a slight sneer. "You have a whole university of people translating for you. Why ask me?"

The Death's Chosen is not cursed. Death is where he finds his power. Death is his power.

"Because I need someone who…" Finn paused. What reason should he give? Statecraft would likely demand he be cagey. Statecraft likely would tell him that showing Tearlach anything was foolish. So statecraft be damned. "I need someone who knows what they're talking about and will tell me the truth."

Tearlach's eyebrows lifted. "I know many things and am not fond of lies. But I am no scholar."

"But you know your people's history and their myths. Not to mention things that may not be myths," Finn stated the last softly. He lifted his gaze to Tearlach. "I think that you will tell me the truth of whatever you find in plain language."

Tearlach's lips curled into an uncertain smile. "The truth? I said I am not fond of lies, but the truth is a powerful weapon to give a potential enemy."

"Are we enemies, Tearlach? Because I do not think so," Finn said.

If I am Death's Chosen, then the Achuviens are my people too.

A second eyebrow lifted. "Are we allies then?"

"How about friends?" Finn smiled at him.

"Friends? Eh, we shall see." But Tearlach seemed pleased at the designation. He touched the book. "Now what is in here that you are so interested in? More about the Dreadbrood?"

"Well, sort of. The Death's Chosen," Finn said.

"Oh, my, the Death's Chosen is an even bigger myth than the Dreadbrood!" Tearlach chuckled, but not unkindly.

Finn smiled. He only *hoped* that was so.

But if I am Death's Chosen I could wield the Dreadbrood against Marikoth. He shook himself. *I don't need an army to defeat him. I can do it myself. If I could find him…*

"That book is supposed to be all about him… or her… or them," Finn quickly corrected. "I need to understand who they are and what role they play."

"They play *no* role, Finrael. They are not real." Tearlach shook his head, but then put up a hand as he saw Finn open his mouth, "But I will read this and tell you what it says about your precious Death's Chosen."

"Thank you," Finn said, meaning it.

"You know if the Death's Chosen was a real person, they would have rights to my kingdom," Tearlach said lightly. Perhaps too lightly.

Finn knew he had to tread lightly here. "Achuvia already has a great king. It needs no other. But that doesn't mean that the Death's Chosen could not help protect that land."

Tearlach slowly nodded. "Perhaps. We shall see what this author says."

The two of them walked upstairs together. Tearlach regaled him with tales of a wolf hunt–not in Rirea–but in another land. It was a good story though with lots of blood, unnecessary swearing, and, somehow, nudity got in there. The thought of Tearlach *nude* had Finn hiding a grin and shaking his head.

He took leave of the Achuvien king on the stairs and headed into Rohan's bedroom. He was a little tired and thought about napping, but found himself drifting back out onto the balcony to his nest of furs. He settled into them and stared towards the Wall and the Fae Empire beyond.

When his father returned, he must have an argument–perhaps many arguments–to convince his father of the rightness of him and Rohan being together. And so much more. He wished he *could* talk to Thalanil at that moment. His father had gone to find answers for him about Death Mages. That meant that Thalanil might be open to hearing other things. Maybe his father could parse all of this out.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a part of the Wall flicker. He snapped his head towards the movement. Nothing. But the Eye of the Raven necklace around his neck suddenly grew icy cold and jiggled against his chest.

Someone I love is in danger. Someone I love…

He stood up. The furs fell off of him and pooled at his feet. The Wall section flickered again, but this time it went away. It was *gone* just as it had been when he, Rohan, Serxio, Leonid and Tyreon had entered the Empire.

Was this Tyreon's doing now? Was the King of Wolves coming for a visit? Perhaps his father had returned far faster than Ryleth had anticipated and she hadn't had a chance to contact him via the Luminus before Thalanil decided to come get him and return him to the Empire. Finn's heart thudded harder in his chest. He wanted to see his father and let Thalanil know he was all right. He also was curious what his father had found out from his grandfather about Death Mages.

Maybe Grandfather knows something about the Death's Chosen.

But he was also nervous about seeing Thalanil. He knew there would be a fight–hopefully only with words–as his father wanted him to have nothing to do with Rohan. But this was a fight they had to have. Perhaps it was best that it occur now before further discussions were had with the other regents. His father should be there when they spoke about Marikoth's danger and whatever was happening to the land.

The Dreadbrood might be behind some of this, but all the way to Bolan or Sultane?

The Eye of the Raven was jerking wildly on his neck again. This wasn't a visit by his father, friendly or otherwise. Something was wrong. Something was very wrong. There was a flapping sound and Finn's hair was blown back. He lifted his right forearm to shield his eyes. Silver Soul lowered down beside him. Her eyes were filled with rage.

"Silver Soul! What's wrong?" he cried.

The other one–the one who killed my mistress–returns to the Empire! She informed him

Shock filled Finn. "M-Marikoth?"

How did Marikoth get the Wall to come down? His father wouldn't let him in! Tyreon wouldn't either! So how…

It doesn't matter! He's going into the Empire and no one knows! I have to stop him! I can end him now! End this!

The Eye of the Raven was so cold it burned his skin. Time was running out for someone he loved.

"Silver Soul, take me after him!" Finn cried.

There was no time to warn Rohan or tell him where Finn was going. He just had to leave. Now. Or it would be too late.

Good! She roared. *Let us destroy our enemy!*

He jumped onto the wyvern's back and they started towards the Empire.

Meanwhile, in the Empire...

KING THALANIL RAVENSPAR clutched his father's injured form tightly against his own as he teleported them from his father's home at Faerseton back to Aymar. His beloved wyvern mount, Shadeheart, stumbled as they instantly shifted from the snowy mountains of Old Norbreask to the top of the Wyvern Tower at his summer palace without the wyvern having to flap his wings once.

His father groaned and his hands flexed spasmodically in Thalanil's robes as Thalanil lifted the older Fae down onto the ground from Shadeheart's back. He expected Elion to race out to them, take Shadeheart's reins and assist in getting his father down the tower stairs. But the stable master did not appear.

"Elion?! ELION?! I need you!" Thalanil cried.

His thoughts were only to get his father to a healer. The poison was draining his father's life away like sand through an hourglass. He could feel it in his bones. He was losing his father! Panic settled in his chest like a frantic bird. Fae did not die, but for violence or magic. Now he might lose *both* parents, which was an unthinkable tragedy for his immortal race.

Two dead parents. Two Death Mages in our direct line. Some might think the Ravenspars are cursed.

"My son," his father breathed painfully and leaned heavily against him, "Something is *wrong*."

There was so much wrong that, at first, Thalanil did not know what he meant. And then it came over him. A wave of cold. It felt as if all life stilled and held its breath so as to go unnoticed.

Enemy. There is an enemy nearby.

Thalanil spun towards the steps of the tower, raising a magical shield as he did so, just as Marikoth glided up the final step. He stared at his elder brother. It had been an age since he'd looked upon his brother's face. Not even in Rirea when Marikoth had attacked him had he seen it. That beloved face that he would know anywhere.

But it was changed.

The beautiful, laughing Marikoth, who had never seemed afraid, and had viewed the world and its difficulties as adventures, was gone. The person before him looked to be made of bone and flame. Marikoth was dressed all in white, but it did not symbolize purity here, but death. These were the vestments of the dead and for the death that he would cause.

"Marikoth," their father choked out.

There was longing and love in their father's voice. Could he not see that this creature before them was not his son? Not anymore. Not at all. And while sickness and death swirled around his elder brother like a dancing cape in the wind, there was nothing weak about him. He was not suffering a decline as their father had said. No, this was a being that was at the height of his powers.

"Marikoth," their father repeated and reached out to the Death Mage.

Marikoth stared at their father's hand with contempt.

Thalanil grasped it and drew it back. He did not want Marikoth to touch their father in any way. His brother was unclean. Tainted. Twisted. He saw all of this. Finrael was nothing like Marikoth. And he thought of their father's words that there could be only *one* Death Mage at a time. No amount of Death Magic could change Finn into a creature like Marikoth. But would he not have said the same before? Perhaps not entirely.

If my son is not a Death Mage then what is he?

But the question was blown away as he saw the others that accompanied his brother to the top of the Wyvern Tower to greet him and welcome him home. Lady Beinelis, Lord Paquen, the Keeper of the Order Lyari and her assistant, Tela stood arrayed behind Marikoth as if an honor guard. He did not demand to know what the others were doing with his elder brother. He *knew* they were all traitors. The way they looked at Marikoth with this kind of strange, sickly awe that made his skin crawl would have told him this, even if his father hadn't revealed some of their betrayal beforehand. His only other thought was for Finrael. What had they done to his son while he had been gone?

"You dare come before me, Marikoth? After what you have done, not just to me, but to our father? Sending assassins? You dare come into my sight after that?" Thalanil growled.

Marikoth ignored his words. "And here I feared you wouldn't be back in time to welcome me home, dear brother! But I didn't send my best to deal with the two of you so what could I truly expect?" Marikoth allowed a wicked smile to cross his lips. "But I am a little surprised to see that you managed to save our father. So far anyways. I'm so glad for that. I did fear he'd be dead before I had a chance to kill him myself."

"Bastard!" Thalanil reached for his power.

His father clutched his shoulders. "No! He's *ill*, Thalanil!"

"He's a monster!" Thalanil hissed. "He wants to kill you!"

"No, no, that's the anger and hurt speaking in *both* of you. Don't you remember how much you loved each other?" His father looked between him and Marikoth. "You were inseparable. There was

nowhere you went, Marikoth, where Thalanil did not want to go, and you always wanted Thalanil by your side. Do you not remember?"

Thalanil trembled with fury. His breathing came in short, harsh gasps. His father had been poisoned at Marikoth's hand, but he *still* wanted to give Marikoth the benefit of the doubt that he was the son he'd known and loved somewhere deep down. Almost against his will, Thalanil remembered Marikoth's face looking down into his–he had been so much smaller then–and it wasn't filled with this evil glee, but tenderness and love for him. He remembered Marikoth offering him his hand. It was before his coronation as Crown Prince of the Empire and Marikoth was to lead him into the throne room.

"You mustn't be scared or even nervous, Thalanil," Marikoth had said as he squeezed Thalanil's hand gently. "Because I will be with you every step of the way. And the bond of brotherhood we share is greater than anything."

Thalanil swallowed hard. How could the young Fae who he'd so admired become *this*? Marikoth was as pale as the marble that made up Aymar now. His hair was completely white. The only color came from his glowing red eyes and his lips. They looked to be stained with blood.

Thalanil's mind offered him another image of his brother with long, black hair and sun-kissed skin. Marikoth had never spent a minute indoors that he couldn't spend out of it. Though he'd loved to study, he'd loved the outdoors best. He would bring books with him into the garden or the woods. Oftentimes, Marikoth would fly them down by the river with a basket of food and a few large, dusty tomes. They would bathe their bodies in the sun and the water and afterwards his elder brother would read to him of ancient battles and great magics long forgotten.

I loved his voice. I loved him. He was everything to me as a boy. If only he had stayed dead and yet…

"Let me speak to him. Thalanil, please! This battle between you is wrong. You are brothers. You loved each other once. You can do so again," his father pleaded.

What if Marikoth could come back? What if he could be cured? What if he could be himself again?

And if Marikoth could be purged of whatever sickness Death Magic brought with it, then his elder brother could help Thalanil's beloved son learn what he needed to learn and avoid what he needed to steer well clear of with his unique and powerful gift. He imagined what it would be like for both him and Finrael to have a doting brother and learned uncle. To share the burdens and the joys of ruling the Empire. To not be alone.

He knew that these were foolish hopes. That the chance of them coming true was near non-existent, even if Marikoth had wished to be his old self again, the effect of Death Magic was too strong upon him.

But what if?

It was so foolish to hesitate, to hold back, but he did. Because of hope. Fragile as spun glass.

"Marikoth," their father said as he turned to face Thalanil's elder brother. "I know you are angry with me. Rightfully so. But you also need to understand that Thalanil had no role in what I did. He had no idea what I planned before I did it, and he believed me when I told him you were dead."

"Ah, yes, the evil Death Mage that had killed our mother! I'm sure Thalanil was only sorry that he could not strike the killing blow against me himself!" Marikoth chuckled.

"You loved her, too!" Thalanil shouted. Marikoth's expression went curiously blank as Thalanil shook. "You loved her just as I did. The person you were back then would have rather died than keep on living with that guilt!"

"Finrael still lives," Marikoth's voice was flat. "And he killed your beloved Maeve. Yet you did not send him to an early grave."

"He didn't mean it. He had no idea it was happening. Maeve knew what he was and what would happen. She accepted that she would have to die for him to live," Thalanil got out.

"Marikoth was the same. Your mother chose that fate, too, though I wished to deny it. She did," their father said.

"But you still sent me away and with *nothing*," Marikoth spat.

"I thought I was protecting you," their father said.

"Liar." Marikoth did not raise his voice as he said this. It was stated in an almost matter-of-fact tone. "You were afraid of me. Afraid of what I was, what I could do and what I meant for your rule."

"In part. But I could not let you stay here. People knew you were a Death Mage. They would have–have killed you themselves," their father said.

"Really?" Marikoth let out a bark of bitter, brittle laughter. He gestured back towards those who served him now. "They don't look eager to throw me on a pyre or hang me from a tree until I am dead! They know the truth."

"What truth?" their father asked, swaying slightly.

Thalanil reached over to steady him. "You need a healer, Father." He spat at Marikoth, "Our father is dying! We have no time for these games! He needs a healer. Now!"

"He is the one who has brought the gods' wrath upon us," Lyari said, pointing at his father with an unwavering finger.

"What nonsense is this?" Thalanil snarled. "You are the head of the faith! You hate Death Mages!"

In fact, the faith perpetuated the myths about them. They were the ones who ostensibly read the gods' will regarding who should rule the Empire of the Eclipse Throne and Death Mages were not on the list as possible candidates. Or they hadn't been. But the faith was a creature of his own family's making. They were not autonomous. They merely were mouthpieces for what the entire clan decided.

But no one would tell them to support Marikoth, would they? Even if they were determined to get rid of me, it would not be to replace me with him!

Yet the faith was aligned with Marikoth. A Death Mage. A murderer countless times over. A vicious creature. Did they simply not know what Marikoth was? Had Marikoth misled them in some

way? Not just the faith but the rest of the family?

"Yes, but we were wrong," Lyari explained. "We've watched how under your rule the Empire is slipping into ruin. We've watched over the years as the very plants attack us. The Ostils nearly got inside the palace the other day. The gods are giving us clear signs that you are *not* the true king, Thalanil."

Did they actually believe that the overgrowth was caused by his rule even though it had existed before his own birth? Or had Marikoth whispered honeyed words in their ears about what their positions *could* be if they simply betrayed him? Real power instead of reflected power?

"What *rot* is this?" Thalanil growled. "There is no audience of rubes here to believe your ridiculous lies! The overgrowth has long been besieging our lands. Before my birth. Before Marikoth's! Before our father's even! But you use that as an excuse to betray your king?"

"But it has gotten so much worse under you. The gods were showing us that we had to turn from this path for a long time. And only now have they lost their patience," Lyari said almost primly.

"The *gods* had nothing to do with stopping the Ostils! My son did. The Death Mage who you would condemn," and here he let out a strangled laugh, "by evidently, serving *another* Death Mage! This is madness!"

"Your son showed us that what the Empire needs *is* a Death Mage!" Tela cried, her eyes wide with an almost zeal.

Thalanil considered this, though the source seemed quite insane to him. He thought of his son on the throne. He thought of how his son's magic could be used to curb the overgrowth. What if it *wasn't* a curse that a Death Mage was born to them many times over? Maybe the land itself was trying to tell him what it needed.

"You may not be wrong about that," Thalanil said slowly. "But my *son* would then be the proper successor. *Not* Marikoth."

"Finrael is *not* a Death Mage," Marikoth said flatly.

"What game are you playing?" Thalanil stared at his brother even as his heart beat too quickly.

"There can be only *one* Death Mage at a time," their father whispered.

"But Finrael exists!" Thalanil objected. "He–"

"Is not what you think. Is not what any of us thought. He is a threat beyond imagining," Marikoth said and his lips curled back from his teeth.

"You think my son is a threat? YOU?!" Thalanil laughed bitterly. "You'll say anything to justify your wrongful actions!" He spoke to the others, "Marikoth is *not* fit to rule. He is a murderer! He is going mad!"

His brother's eyes narrowed. "Mad, you say? And how would you know, dear brother? You thought me dead by our father's hand until not so long ago."

"I told him, Marikoth," their father gasped out. "I can see it. Even if you cannot. You are *ill*–"

"I am stronger than I've ever been." Marikoth's eyes glowed a sulfurous red.

"No, my son, you are on the edge of a cliff and about to fall off," their father gasped out.

Their father's legs gave out beneath him. Thalanil caught him as their father sank with a groan to the ground. He lay there, eyes half shut, breathing stentoriously, face slick with cold sweat.

"He needs a healer!" Thalanil got to his feet. "And so help me if any of you try to stop me from getting him one," he paused as the sky clouded over with storm clouds. Lightning streaked across it as the Empire responded to its king's rage, "none of you will survive it."

"We take no joy in this, Thalanil," Lady Beinelis spoke for the first time. She, who had been the one he had counted on at every Council Meeting, now stabbed him in the heart with her words. "But you must be deposed. And both you and Laiex cannot be allowed to leave this tower, or else the gods may completely damn us."

"You should have read the room, Thalanil," Lord Paquen muttered. "When others offered to step in, you should have let them."

This was the Fae who had tried to blacken his and Finrael's names by calling his son a Death Mage and yet here he was, serving Marikoth.

Power corrupts. And the desire for it corrupts people completely.

Thalanil did not bother with more words. He felt the others bringing up their power. He saw the eager looks of battle in their eyes. Strangely, only Marikoth appeared almost sad even though they were doing this on his behalf. He did not wait to strike. They were all powerful magic users.

But they were *nothing* compared to him.

The fire flowed out like water from his hands towards the traitors. Time seemed to slow. Tela's mouth formed an 'O' of shock and horror. Her magic shield was burned away in a second and the flames licked her skin. Her screams were shrill and high like that of a child. Lyari's shield didn't last much longer. Soon she was engulfed by flames and screaming too. The nobles worked together–something that they had never done in his memory–to form a shield that withstood the first blast, but as the fire kept flowing they retreated quickly back down the stairs.

Only Marikoth seemed unconcerned.

The flames curled around his elder brother like a lover's arms. But they did not touch him. Marikoth closed his eyes as if in ecstasy. The flames caressed him, but did not burn. His pale, perfect skin remained untouched.

"Thalanil, stop! You're feeding him!" his father cried and grasped his ankle. "Get out of here! Flee!"

The fire that streamed from his fingers was cut off. Thalanil soon saw his father was right as Marikoth seemed to *breathe* in the flames. His red eyes glowed ever brighter with the captured fire. Tela was whimpering on the ground. Her hair was gone. Her skin was blistered and bleeding. Lyari collapsed beside her. The nobles were distinctly singed. But Marikoth was unmarred.

There must be a way to harm him! If not magic then weapons?

"Flee, Thalanil,"' his father repeated. He managed to sit up and tug Thalanil weakly back towards

Shadeheart who was rearing back and baring his fangs at Marikoth.

"He doesn't want to flee, Father. He wants to fight. A friendly tussle between brothers!" Marikoth laughed. "Except both of you will *die* at the end of it!"

"You cannot win this fight, Thalanil!" his father cried.

Not by magic, no. But steel can do it.

Thalanil sent magical ropes to bind his brother, to keep him from reaching his own magic and using it. They wound around Marikoth in icy blue bonds, pinning his arms to his sides. Not that Marikoth fought against them. He stood there, allowing himself to be bound, smiling.

"You cannot harm him this way, Thalanil!" his father insisted. "Everything you do will just make him stronger!"

Thalanil unsheathed Kharazack, or Ghostbringer as it was known in Common. The blade rang as it exited the sheath and the steel itself shimmered with blue-white light. It was an Aeturnal weapon, of course. Enchanted to drain life and magic–much like a Death Mage–the sword seemed a safe bet to use on his brother.

"Kharazack!" Marikoth breathed. His eyes widened. "Where did you find that? It was not in the armory when Father threw me away! You must have gone looting tombs. And I thought I was the only one who would do that. Naughty little brother!"

Thalanil ignored Marikoth's taunt. But memories of him before he was this creature tried to crowd his mind as Thalanil prepared to cleave Marikoth's head from his shoulders. Memories he had long suppressed. One of them playing hide and seek in the garden. Of Marikoth always finding him because Thalanil couldn't stop giggling. He'd wanted his elder brother to find him. Because being with Marikoth was the best thing in the world.

As he drew the blade back, Thalanil remembered Marikoth taking him on his first flight on a wyvern. Marikoth had tucked him securely against his chest. Marikoth's arms had been around him, keeping him safe and sound, as powerful wings had pumped and lifted them off this very same tower. Their parents had thought Thalanil too young to go flying, but Marikoth had taken him anyway, knowing that being in the air, one with the wind, was in Thalanil's nature. By the end of that first flight, Thalanil had been hooting and hollering, spreading his arms wide, completely unafraid. When they'd landed, their parents had been there with tight expressions, but those loosened as Marikoth had told them simply, "I wouldn't let anything bad happen to him. He's my little heart. But I can't bear to see him kept on the ground when he belongs in the sky."

As the blade sliced through the air, Thalanil knew tears were streaming down his face as he remembered finding Marikoth sitting by the fire after their mother had died. Marikoth, who never cried, but always smiled, was as pale as milk. Tear tracks stained his cheeks. The whites of his eyes were red from crying yet he made no sound. He just rocked in misery. Thalanil had crawled into Marikoth's lap, pulled his elder brother's arm around him and said, "Mother isn't really gone. I can still feel her. In you, Marikoth. She's in you."

I love you, brother. Whatever is left of you. But this must end.

As the blade flew those final inches towards Marikoth's pale neck, Thalanil remembered all the evil his brother had done. Both intentional and not. And what he intended to do. His brother's eyes were filled with a mad hunger that could never be doused. That hunger could never be satisfied.

The blade was just about to reach his skin when it stopped.

The shock of it ran up his arms and the blade fell from his numb hands. Marikoth smiled. He tossed his head back and the bonds that surrounded him were drained to nothingness. Thalanil snarled and tried to gather the storm to split his brother in half. And that was when he felt his brother's hands upon him. Somehow Marikoth had crossed the distance and had him. He struggled to break free, but he couldn't. He couldn't move at all.

Then he felt the *pull* on his life. He'd experienced a touch of it before, when Marikoth had nearly caught him in Rirea. And he'd seen his son use it against the Ostils. But this touch–a touch on his *soul*–was nothing compared to what he'd felt before. It was the most obscene of caresses. His brother's lips parted as his smile grew.

"By the gods, you are like a raging sun," Marikoth murmured and he leaned towards Thalanil as if to kiss him. "I shall have a whole star inside of me after I drain you to death."

Thalanil tried to scream, but no sound came out. The *pull* became more pronounced. Thalanil's knees went weak. He felt himself leaving his body. The essence of who he was being drunk down like fine wine. Terror corkscrewed into him.

"I want you to know, dear brother, that I don't blame you for our father's actions," Marikoth whispered into his right ear. "You accepted Finrael. You were going to make him our Crown Prince. For that, I still love you and will make your death… quick."

"NO!" Their father screamed as he thrust Ghostbringer through Marikoth's chest.

His brother didn't see or sense the blow coming so he did not block it. With tears running down his face, their father slipped the sword between Marikoth's ribs. His brother's eyes met Thalanil's as the blood bloomed. Red and bright against the white tunic he wore. Marikoth made no sound. Not even a grunt from the impact. His father twisted the sword and more blood bloomed like fresh roses. Marikoth smiled.

Then their father screamed.

One of Marikoth's hands was lightly pressed on top of their father's shoulder. He watched as their father's eyes rolled back in his head, going all white, and then his body turned gray. Gray as ash. Before he disintegrated.

Gone.

Laiex Origeiros Ravenspar was no more.

Father.

Thalanil went to scream his grief and rage, but all that came out was a soft whisper. But it was Shadeheart's roar instead that split the air as the mighty wyvern attacked. Its jaws sank into

Marikoth's shoulder causing his brother to lose his grip.

"You blasted creature!" Marikoth shrieked.

But it gave Thalanil a chance to break free. He staggered backwards, but his legs wouldn't hold him. Grief was compounded with horror as Marikoth drained Shadeheart next. There were terrible shrieks. Unearthly shrieks from his brave Shadeheart.

"No…" Thalanil gasped and reached out to send magic to his mount.

But his magic sputtered. He had nothing to send to Shadeheart's defense. He dragged himself towards Ghostbringer. The moment his fingertips touched the hilt, his wyvern's screams stopped. The other wyvern were crying out, but there was a great emptiness as Shadeheart's voice was no longer among them.

Thalanil attempted to lift Ghostbringer. He would not let the deaths of his father and Shadeheart go unavenged. He knew it would be his last act, but he had to do it. His brother was a monster.

Finrael, forgive me for leaving you. Forgive me. I will love you forever, my son.

Marikoth's foot stepped on the blade and kept it flat to the ground. Thalanil did not have the strength to lift it.

"They shouldn't have done that," Marikoth's voice was ragged, not triumphant though Thalanil could see that his wounds were healed. But the madness in his soul was so much worse. "Because of them I will make you suffer. I will make you–"

"MARIKOTH, STOP!" Finrael roared.

There was a powerful down rush of wings as a massive silver wyvern appeared twenty feet above them. And riding her was his son. Finrael.

"Silver Soul!" Someone cried out.

Marikoth was staring upward with his lips skinned back from his teeth. His face looked more like a skull than a living Fae's. But there was something in his expression that was different than before.

Fear.

Marikoth was afraid.

"Touch my father and I will drain you to the dregs, Marikoth!" Finrael thundered.

"He will be ash before you can finish me!" Marikoth screamed back. "So it seems we are at an impasse, nephew!"

"Do it… do it… kill him… forget me…" Thalanil gasped out.

He didn't know if his voice was loud enough for Finrael to hear or if his son simply ignored his words.

"Give me my father and we will leave. I will not… I will not harm you," Finrael promised. "So long as you don't harm Thalanil."

"No… no, kill him…" Thalanil called.

"We have a deal, Finrael," Marikoth said as he lifted Thalanil up with his magic until he was hovering ten feet off the ground. "But know this, the next time we meet, I will end you, nephew, and

all you love!"

"No, uncle, it is you who will die and there will be no one to mourn you," Finrael growled.

"Here. Catch!"

Marikoth tossed Thalanil off of the tower. Thalanil was unable to reach his magic to stop or even slow his plummet to the earth. But there was a wild flap of wings and a silver body streaked past him. A clawed forelimb caught him neatly. Unconsciousness started to pull him under within moments of that claw curling around him in an almost tender embrace.

The last words he heard were Finrael's as his son commanded, "Silver Soul, get us out of here! Get us back to Rirea!"

Rohan adjusted the high collar of his royal robes. They were stiff, starched and hardly allowed him to breathe. Serxio, of course, thought they were perfect. Rohan desperately wanted to strip them off and roll around naked–preferably with Finn–on a large bed. But he needed to be king right now. And he was making Serxio and Leonid join him in this matter. If he had to suffer with royal duties, then they would, too.

Leonid was to the right while Serxio was to the left. Both looked resplendent but Rohan knew that only Serxio was enjoying this day of dress-up. The foppish young lord was also making eyes at each and every one of Queen Artremaya's ladies-in-waiting, who preceded the queen down the royal red carpet. The ladies-in-waiting appeared to quite welcome to the idea of knowing Serxio more intimately.

"I feel like I am seeing the future. Namely, the next ten women whose hearts Serxio will break," Leonid murmured low so that only Rohan and Serxio might hear.

"Now, now, I will fill them with exquisite joy before I break their hearts. So it is not as if I am leaving them with nothing," Serxio sniffed.

"Nothing must be a relative term in your understanding of it," Leonid scowled.

"You're just jealous because none of them want to come with you on your rounds or whatever you call them!" Another superior sniff from Serxio.

"If the ladies like peacocks instead of *real* men, then I'm definitely not their flavor!" Leonid groused.

"Peacocks? I'm not a peacock!" Serxio lost his momentary composure as he snapped his head towards Leonid on the other side of Rohan's throne. "While I'll have you know–"

"Gentlemen," Rohan said softly. "We *are* supposed to be on our best behavior in front of our guests, yes?"

"I apologize, my king," Serxio said as he quickly smiled at the flouncing ladies-in-waiting.

"As do I, my king," Leonid said.

"I know none of us want to be here," Rohan muttered. "But we must be."

"Smile, King Rohan," Serxio said out of the corner of his mouth, now suddenly acting like

propriety mattered.

"I *am* smiling," Rohan replied as they both watched Queen Artremaya glide up the red and gold carpet towards his dais.

"That's actually grimacing, Your Majesty," Leonid pointed out, trying to hide his own smile.

"You're trying to welcome her. Not frighten her away, my king," Serxio reminded him.

"Are you so sure about that? If she leaves, we won't have to do any more of these royal shindigs," Leonid pointed out.

Rohan snorted, which had Queen Artremaya lifting an eyebrow as she had just made it to the base of the dais. She was a beautiful, regal woman in her thirties with ebony colored skin and light amber eyes. Her hair was drawn back from the front of her head in tight braids. A crown of silver and jade encircled her forehead. Unlike him, she was dressed elegantly, but much more practically in a long, dark-green velvet coat that was tight around her torso only to flare out from her waist and fall to her ankles. Silvery-green leggings and thigh-high green suede boots completed her outfit. She had chosen not to freshen up and change before meeting him, but to literally leave her carriage and come directly to the throne room. That was interesting in and of itself.

"King Rohan, thank you so much for inviting me to Rirea," she said with a graceful curtsey.

"Queen Artremaya," he said while inclining his head.

His natural urge was to rise from his chair and greet her with a bow, but, as this was his kingdom, he remained seated. He hoped that the warmth in his voice made up for the stiff procedure. She straightened and looked at him out of those tawny eyes that searched his face. He wondered what she was looking for.

"I passed through Rirea with my parents when I was just a little girl. Thirty years ago now," she said. "We received a very warm welcome from your parents. May the gods rest their souls."

His throat tightened at just the mention of them though his feelings were still conflicted.

"While I hope to extend you the same warm welcome, Rirea has changed much even from those days," Rohan admitted.

He could hardly do anything else. While he was sure Rirea looked bleak to his eyes, he could imagine how it appeared to someone used to the golden wheat fields of Sultane. He imagined *shabby* and *poor* were the kindest words one could use for it.

But we might now know the true cause of it, at least in part. The Dreadbrood. It is housed under the very earth here. But what is it doing here?

While he was grateful to greet Artremaya, this discovery was huge and he needed to talk it over more with Finn, Serxio and Leonid. They had already brought some of the soil for Christopher to look over. This was surely the source for the leaching of life, or the greatest part of it.

Her expression changed to one of sadness. "We have heard of your difficulties at my court, but to see it…" She shook her head, as if no words could truly convey the horror of what she'd seen. He tried not to bristle. She refocused on him. "I wish you to know that I will be slashing the price of

grain we are sending you as well as any other edible goods. I know that people have been taking advantage of your dire situation. Anyone who continues to do so will be punished severely."

Rohan blinked, surprised by this. It wasn't that his coffers and his people's pockets couldn't use the relief, but his situation was benefiting her people. What did she care for those beyond her borders?

Refugees from Rirea are streaming into her kingdom. That's likely why, he reminded himself.

As things became more and more dire, his people were seeking a better life elsewhere. They were abandoning their homes and taking only what they could carry and had any value. People who had lived in Rirea for countless generations were simply going away with not a thought to return. And he could not blame them.

If the Dreadbrood could be removed from the earth, would things return to normal? Assuming there was someplace to put them or a way to destroy them. Or is there truly something in the unbalance between the Empire and Rirea that has not been explained?

Rohan realized he had been silent too long by the slight shifting of the multicolored plumes on Serxio's hat. He quickly got out, "Your generosity stunned me into momentary silence, Queen Artremaya."

She nodded. "I should have done something sooner. But we all have troubles that can blind us to anything beyond our borders."

"I fully understand. And I am sorry if you are having any issues of your own. If there is anything I can do to help," he paused.

What could he do? He had nothing to offer. In the past, it had been Rirea who had offered the helping hand to those around them. His line had been notoriously generous. War had long been a thing of the past between Rirea and its neighbors because of the working relationship the De Clares had with the other countries. He had been so consumed with the problems here that he hadn't been able to continue that relationship building. Until now.

"I do not see your uncle with you," Artremaya said with a slightly confused smile. "The invitation I received was… well, it was from–"

"My uncle believed me dead. That is why he was named as… as king. But, to his great delight and mine, I am alive. He is not here because… actually, he is working on something for me right now that I could not have him taken away from, even for such an important and delightful duty such as welcoming you," he explained, lying through his teeth in part.

He had not wished his uncle here. The Queen of Sultane's arrival brought up all the feelings of betrayal he'd experienced upon returning home from the Empire. Not to mention that he had upset Finn. *Again*.

"Well, I'm so relieved!" Her eyes reflected the knowledge that she guessed there was far more here than he was saying.

"As am I," he said, flashing her a genuine smile. "We have so much to discuss, but I'm certain you

need to rest after your journey or, at least, we should talk in more comfortable surroundings than these."

His eyes lifted to the coffered ceiling and elaborate silk hangings and gold leaf. She grinned.

"I wouldn't mind getting off my feet," she admitted. "And perhaps a glass of wine."

"The cellars are still substantial here," he assured her. "We can meet–"

The throne room doors were abruptly thrown open. One of the Guard–Finley, he thought the man's name was–popped inside as if he was escaping hot oil. His face was pasty white and his mouth was open in a perpetual "O" of panic. Everyone turned around to see him practically running up the carpet.

"What in the gods' names is Finley doing?" Leonid growled and made a violent movement for Finley to get out of the throne room *post haste*.

But Finley managed to squawk out, "Dragon! Dragon in the courtyard, Your Majesty!"

"Wyvern!" Rohan, Serxio and Leonid cried at once.

"Queen Artremaya, I'm afraid I must cut our greeting short," Rohan said as he leaped off of the throne and reached around it for Lightbringer. He would bring it just in case Silver Soul had decided that the Guard appealed to her more than fish.

"Is he truly saying there's a *dragon* in your courtyard? Because, if so, I am most certainly going with you. Sere, my sword!" Artremaya commanded.

One of her ladies-in-waiting rushed out of the throne room to retrieve her weapon.

"She's a wyvern and a–a friend," Rohan said as he, Serxio and Leonid clattered down the stairs.

"You are friends with wyverns?" Artremaya lifted a delicate eyebrow.

"He's friends with the King of the Wolves. We all are!" Serxio gushed.

"It's a long story," Rohan admitted as they all ran from the room, forgetting any royal dignity or protocol.

As soon as they stepped out of the throne room, Sere tossed a long, curved blade to her queen who caught it expertly. It was Rohan's turn to lift an eyebrow. Artremaya was not like most nobles he'd met. Maybe she could be a friend. But nothing more was said as they raced out of the castle into the large, square courtyard where a very large wyvern was waiting for them. Silver Soul was *not* alone.

"Finn?" Rohan gasped as he saw the young prince jump gracefully down from Silver Soul's back to the ground.

"My father! Rohan, I think he's dying!" Finn cried and was going over to a hay cart where a body lay, still and quiet.

Sure enough it was King Thalanil, but he did not look as Rohan had last seen him. All the color was gone from his skin. He appeared almost translucent somehow, as if he could simply fade away to nothing and leave nothing but his clothes behind. Finn clambered up on top of the hay wagon and took his father's hand. The wyvern made a mournful sound.

"It's all right, Silver Soul!" Finn turned his head to the great beast. "You were as gentle carrying him as possible. And you laid him down here so gently! It's nothing you did. Marikoth–Marikoth…" Finn's jaw clenched and he seemed incapable of getting the words out past the grief and rage that clearly filled him.

"That's the Fae king!" Artremaya gasped as she got past the wonder of Silver Soul being there and not attacking them.

"Oh, yes, we're friends with the Fae, too. Well, a lot of them. Well, a few of them. Well, Finn and Ryleth to be sure," Serxio explained. "That's Finn. He's Thalanil's son."

"My, my, my," Artremaya murmured, but said nothing else. One look into those intelligent eyes told Rohan that whatever she had originally thought of him and the situation here was changing by the moment.

But he could not focus on her any longer. He had to get Thalanil off the hay cart and inside with a healer.

"Serxio, Leonid, lift him down into my arms. I will carry him inside to someplace safe," Rohan instructed.

Finn's tearstreaked face turned towards him and gratefulness flashed there. "He can't die, Rohan! I can't lose him too! I've just found him."

"He won't, Finn. I promise it." Rohan turned to the foppish young lord. "Serxio, after we're done here, go fetch the best doctors from the university. Especially older ones who will have experience dealing with the Fae."

"It will be done, my king," Serxio assured him.

He and Leonid were already on top of the hay cart with Finn. Serxio grasped Thalanil's legs and Leonid his shoulders. They lifted him easily.

"By the gods, he feels so *light*! That can't be normal!" Leonid exclaimed, but then he caught sight of Finn's wrenched expression and added, "But I'm sure it will be all right. Definitely all right!"

Rohan came right up to the cart and held his arms out. The two men laid Thalanil over them. Artremaya helped arrange Thalanil against Rohan so he could easily cradle the Fae king in his arms. Finn was about to jump off of the hay cart himself when he lifted his head and spoke to Silver Soul again. The wyvern was making more sounds, low and rumbly like a gigantic cat.

"Yes, yes, please get them and bring them back here. People might be frightened by Ryleth if they don't understand she's a friend," Finn said to the wyvern.

Silver Soul nodded and she flapped her mighty wings as she took off into the sky. Rohan squinted as the almost violent downdraft flattened his hair against his skull.

"Is Ryleth on this side of the Wall or are you having Silver Soul go get her?" Leonid asked.

"She's on this side with a man, two wolves and a bunch of pups," Finn explained as he jumped down onto the cobbled courtyard. "We saw them on the road as we were flying over."

"There's clearly a big story here!" Leonid exclaimed.

"Yes," Finn answered distractedly as he looked at his unconscious father's face. "A terrible one."

"Let us discuss it *after* we get King Thalanil settled," Rohan said.

He turned and hurried back into the castle. Finn and Leonid followed after him while Artremaya broke off to go to her rooms and Serxio headed for the university. He took Thalanil to the North Tower, which had been his grandfather's suite. Luckily, the staff kept the linen fresh and the room well cleaned. It was ridiculous to be worried about freshly aired bed clothes considering Thalanil was unconscious and near death, but Rohan did not want to put the Fae king in anything but the best room.

He lightly set Thalanil on the bed. Leonid stood awkwardly by the door, a look of consternation and concern on his handsome face. Finn checked Thalanil's body for wounds, but shook his head when Rohan asked him if there were any.

"None that are physical, but Marikoth was draining him. In a moment more, he would have…" Again, Finn's voice was choked off by the emotions that wracked him.

"Thalanil was in Rirea?"

"No, Marikoth was at Aymar," Finn answered.

"Marikoth is in the Empire? How did he get past the Wall?" Rohan asked.

"I don't know, but Silver Soul and I saw a section of the Wall go down and she said it was Marikoth. Then my pendant went crazy. It was telling me that someone I loved was in danger," Finn answered, rubbing his hands together as he sat on the edge of Thalanil's bed. "Oh, Father, please be all right. Please."

"If Thalanil is on *this* side of the Wall and Marikoth is on the Empire side…" Leonid let the statement hang.

"Marikoth had people with him. Two of them from Father's Council on his side. I think it was a coup and somehow… somehow Marikoth won." Finn shook his head.

"Good gods," Rohan breathed.

"It's just not possible! Nobody is going to follow that crazy man!" Leonid exploded.

"Watch him drain some of the populace. They'll all get behind him then," Finn said dully and ran a shaking hand over his father's forehead.

Rohan knew the power of fear. His line had never had to use it to rule, but he'd seen it done. It was a terrible and powerful thing. And Marikoth was like a mad god. But focusing on what they could not change in this moment was pointless and would only lead to despair. Finn did not need more of that.

"Let's take Thalanil's boots off. Get him comfortable while we wait for the doctors," Rohan suggested.

"Maybe Ryleth will know something too." Finn wiped the tears that were falling from his eyes.

Rohan drew off Thalanil's boots and set them to the side. As he did so, he touched the Fae king's bare foot with his hand. There was a spark of visible electricity between him and Thalanil.

"What was that?" Finn gasped.

"It was lightning!" Leonid cried out.

"I–I don't know. It just… Wait, I think I *do* know," Rohan gasped as he stared at his hand and Thalanil's skin. "He feels like Lightbringer to me."

"He feels like your magic sword, my king?" Leonid questioned dubiously.

"Yes, just like it does when it's drained of energy," Rohan murmured.

Leonid blinked uncertainly. "Uh, that sounds–"

"Brilliant!" Finn cried. "Can you refill him with energy again, Rohan?"

Rohan nodded slowly. "Yes, but he's a person, not a sword so… so I need to be very careful, I'm guessing."

Finn reached over and squeezed Rohan's left forearm. "I know you can do it! You won't hurt him. You'd never hurt him! Besides, I don't think if he stays like this much longer that he'll… he'll survive."

Rohan nodded. In his brief touch of Thalanil's skin, he had sensed the spark within him was wavering. It was only Thalanil's will to live and desire to stay with his son that had him lasting as long as he had.

Finn stepped away so that Rohan could sit next to Thalanil. Rohan took Thalanil's hands in his, but he sensed this wasn't enough contact for him to access the source of Thalanil. He grimaced but slid his hands underneath the Fae king's shirt.

Thalanil's skin was cool. Too cool. His spark was truly fading fast. Rohan felt for his power. He and Finn had made love last night and this morning. Since they had not used any of his power to replenish the land, he had plenty to replenish Thalanil's reserves. He centered himself and closed his eyes.

He could feel the whole room and everyone in it. Leonid was a bright spark. He could sense the dozens of other bright sparks of servants nearby. Thalanil was like a fading star. And Finn…

Finn always drew him, but his energy signature was like no one else's. It was almost as if he was the opposite of a star. Something that instead of emitting energy, drew it inside. He was all silvers and blacks. He was mesmerizing. Endlessly fascinating. But Rohan wrenched his focus away from Finn. Thalanil's recovery was all that Finn wanted and it would take all of his concentration.

With a final breath in and out, Rohan started to let the magic flow as he did when he reenergized Lightbringer. At first, he only let the barest thread of magic slip from him into the Fae king, but then Thalanil gave out a gasp and arched. The magic was suddenly being *pulled* out of him as if Thalanil was drinking it in as fast as he could.

"Father!" Finn cried.

"It's okay," Rohan said without opening his eyes. "I can feel–feel him. He's coming back. I just need to control the flow."

The trickle became a steady stream, which became a flood. He felt the spiritual spaces in Thalanil

fill up. They were huge. Much larger than Lightbringer, but a voice whispered in his mind that it was only because he hadn't unlocked the sword fully yet. He found himself knowing just how to layer the power inside of Thalanil, how to coil it just so, how to repair him. He smiled as the last bit slotted inside. He was slightly tired, but satisfied with his work. Thalanil was going to recover completely. He'd done it! He was about to open his eyes and see the result of his handiwork when he felt a blade against his throat.

"Father, no!" Finn cried.

Rohan opened his eyes and saw a very angry Thalanil Ravenspar staring at him out of glowing, red eyes. His hand held the dagger without shaking. Rohan could feel its keen edge clearly against his skin when he swallowed.

Thalanil growled, "You will release my son and I immediately, King Rohan."

LOSS AND GAIN

"Father, Rohan is not our enemy! Put down the dagger!" Finn commanded.

He grasped his father's wrist. He felt the tremors running through the Fae king's arm. The dagger fell uselessly from his father's nerveless hand. With a groan, Thalanil collapsed back on the pillows. He stared up at Rohan with a mixture of anger and despair as if he had been well and truly conquered, but not by Marikoth, but by the Heir of House Aeturnal.

Out of the corner of his eye, Finn saw Rohan pass the dagger to Leonid, whose right hand had already rested on the hilt of his sword, though he had not drawn it. Not yet. There would be no need for that. Finn would make sure of it. His father was reaching for Finn with those same shaking hands. Finn brought them up to his lips and kissed them.

"Father, you're safe! You're safe, I promise!" Finn told him.

"You are telling me that, and yet I thought," here his father paused and a spasm of pain crossed his beautiful features, "that I was going to die and leave you alone to face the horrors of my brother."

Finn felt a wave of rage crest inside of him. For a moment, a vision of the still and sleeping Dreadbrood appeared in his mind. He thought that one of the soldier's fingers moved. Just a little. Finn swallowed his rage and kept control of it.

Do I really think the Dreadbrood felt my anger and started to wake? He tried to make the question sound ridiculous, but it didn't. And the answer, the whispered *yes*, did not sound ridiculous at all.

"I've lost our home, Finrael. I've lost my father. Even Shadeheart is *gone*." Thalanil's eyes shut and tears squeezed out of the corners of his eyes. "I have failed. As a son, a master and a king!"

Rohan, who had stood up from the bed, now stepped away and gestured for Leonid to join him in the hall. That would give Finn and his father the privacy Rohan must feel they needed to discuss this. If Thalanil had been capable of being grateful for anything Rohan did, he would have likely felt so at that kindness in not witnessing this grief.

Finn stroked his father's hair. "I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry I wasn't there sooner."

If he had been in the Empire when Marikoth had come, would he have been able to stop the Death Mage and save those who had fallen to him? No, Finn would have been far from the Wyvern Tower.

He would have been too late to save his father. Only Silver Soul's keen eyes and swiftness had saved the day. Not even with the warning of the Eye of the Raven could he have done so.

"You–you saved me." Thalanil's eyes opened. "I was fading, but… you brought me back."

"No, Father, *Rohan* did."

Thalanil stared at him in uncomprehending grief.

"Rohan is truly an Aeturnal. He can transfer power into things and, evidently, *people*. He restored your life force," Finn explained gently but firmly. He would not have a repeat of the dagger against Rohan's throat ever again. "While I can only take life, Rohan can restore it."

Thalanil's eyes went to the closed door of the bedchamber and blinked eyes that were still red with tears.

"So I owe him my life and I put a dagger to his throat?" Thalanil laughed weakly. "Yet another failure. Even though I know he wants to take you from me."

"He doesn't want to take me away from you. Nothing could do that. And Rohan understands that you were in distress and confused," Finn assured him.

"You know him so well," Thalanil stated.

"He is my heart," Finn said simply.

Thalanil continued to stare at the closed door as if contemplating calling Rohan back, but then he sank into the pillows.

"We are in Rirea?" his father asked as he stared at the unfamiliar walls and ceiling.

"Yes. Reave Castle."

"The Aeturnals called it Enrilith. Place of Eternal Waters," Thalanil said. "It almost feels like… but it is *not*."

"You can sense the Aeturnal influence here. It is like Aymar," Finn said out loud what his father could not. "I felt it too. A sense of familiarity when I first arrived here."

His father's eyes narrowed. "Which was not today?"

Finn blushed. "No, it was not today. I have been here for a few weeks."

"Weeks?!" His father's shock and hurt was evident in every syllable.

"Marikoth…" Finn paused as when he said that name his father's eyes flared with rage. "Marikoth unleashed the undead on Reave Castle and then threatened to kill Rohan if I did not return and face him. I do believe he was hoping I would lure *you* here. He was not keen to see me. Long story short, he escaped with some important books and left a glamourized undead to attack me after hurting Rohan rather badly."

"So you've been *here* and not in the Empire since I left to go see my father?" Thalanil asked.

Finn grimaced, but told the truth. "Yes, I was going to return once you did."

"Thank the gods," his father breathed, which had Finn blinking in confusion.

"You're *glad* that I came to Rirea?"

"You were not in the Empire where my enemies fester. I fear if you had been there that something

terrible would have happened to you," his father explained.

"Something *terrible* would have happened to your enemies if they had attempted to go after me," Finn growled.

Thalanil looked up at him again and a faint smile appeared on his lips. He cupped Finn's face. "I forget how very fierce you are. You did not seem afraid of my brother at all."

"I wanted to kill him. I can do it. I mean…" Finn bit his lower lip. "All things being *equal*, I could do it. But he just knows so much more magic than me! I can't get close enough to him to end it and–"

"Finrael, I do not wish you anywhere near him," his father said, red eyes huge with alarm.

"But I must be. I'm meant to kill him! I'm Death's Chosen and he…" Finn stopped himself. He wasn't sure what he had been going to say. He wasn't even sure what he meant by what he already had said. "Forgive me, Father. You need to rest. We can talk later when you're more recovered."

His father's eyes searched his face. Thalanil was not a fool. He had heard the nonsensical words Finn had spoken, but there was something in his expression that told Finn his father was not completely unfamiliar with them.

"We have much to discuss," Thalanil said.

"We do. So much. The Queen of Sultane is here. King Tearlach of Achuvia is also present. We are just waiting for the King of Bolan to join us for a summit."

"A summit on *what*?" Thalanil asked. "Neither of us knew my brother had sunk his claws into our people so deeply–"

"No, it was a summit called by Hugues originally." Another grimace. "It was to seek an alliance to go up against you."

"I see."

"But now they know who the real enemy is. Marikoth. We're not alone, Father. We have allies. All is not lost." Finn squeezed his father's hands before he laid them on top of his chest.

"I do not see how a living host could ever destroy my brother," Thalanil's voice was faint as he said this.

His father's eyelids were sliding shut. Finn grasped the blanket and pulled it up to his father's chin. Thalanil started to breathe sweetly and evenly. Finn stayed by his side for a few minutes to ensure he was, in fact, deeply asleep. Once he was certain, he rose from the bed and padded silently to the door. He slipped out to find Rohan and Leonid in the hallway. Two Guards were at the door.

"Rohan, thank you!" Finn surged into his lover's arms.

"Is he all right?" Rohan asked as he stroked Finn's back and held him tight.

"Yes, he's asleep. I'm so sorry for what he did! Pulling that blade on you! He wasn't–"

"There is no need to apologize," Rohan quickly interrupted. "He's been through something terrible."

"More than I can easily say. I was only there for the end of it." Finn pulled back so that they could

look at one another. “Marikoth somehow got into the Empire. He killed my grandfather and Shadeheart, father’s wyvern, before he drained… drained Father nearly to death. He wasn’t alone, Rohan. He had people with him. Two of the Councilors that I told you about. Tela and some woman I didn’t recognize.”

Rohan’s expression grew more and more grave as Finn spoke. “So it was a coup then and not a simple act of revenge?”

“Marikoth has taken over the Empire,” Finn said. “And anyone who fights him will be–”

“Drained,” Leonid ended for him, his voice darkening. “This is bad, bad news. Marikoth was a terrible foe when we thought him on his own! But if he has the backing of others, that makes him even more dangerous!”

“We know what his ultimate intentions are. He told me: to reunite the Empire, Rirea and whatever other kingdoms were part of the original Aeturnal rule.” Rohan gritted his teeth. “Though I was furious with Hugues for acting in my stead, I am glad that he called the rulers here. We are meeting none too soon.”

“I just hope we are not too late!” Finn tightened his hold on Rohan. “Clearly, he has been working on far more than a revenge plot for quite some time to win over so many people. He might have done so by promising a reunited Empire.”

“Oh, yeah, and divvying up the pieces to his conspirators, including Rirea!” Leonid snarled.

Rohan’s expression darkened then he let out a bitter laugh. “Who would want it, Leonid? Rirea is dying. And I’m not sure anything can reverse this course.”

Finn’s heart clenched. “There must be a way. The Dreadbrood has to be the cause–or some part of it–for the land’s decline.”

“I can’t help but feel its presence here is deliberate and needful somehow,” Rohan said slowly, his eyes flickering over Finn’s face as if he guessed that Finn had something to do with it.

Do I? Am I the leader of this terrible army?

“I feel the same. The Dreadbrood would be the one army that Marikoth could not drain to refuel himself. Just like I couldn’t drain his undead,” Finn stated.

“But how could anyone wield such a thing unless one was Death himself?” Leonid asked.

Finn stared meaningfully into Rohan’s eyes. He willed the other man to know that there might be something more to discuss. Especially after Tearlach translated that book for him. But he didn’t want to talk about it in front of Leonid. Better not to alarm the Guard captain any more than he already was. Rohan gave a brief nod to indicate he understood. They would talk *later*.

Finley appeared at the top of the steps, breathless and red-faced, calling out, “Dragon’s back!”

“Wyvern,” all three of them responded.

Finley shrugged. “It looks like a dragon to me, Your Majesty!”

“Silver Soul will be glad to hear it,” Finn laughed. “Did she bring people with her?”

“Ah, yes! More Fae, a man, and animals! Wolves with pups, but they’re all like puppies. Even the

big ones! So friendly and eating out of your hand and–"

"Finley!" Leonid snapped. "Keep it together, man!"

Finley saluted. "Yes, sir, sorry, sir! Just–"

"Tyreon is the fluffiest of bastards and you say there are pups?" Rohan asked, looking rather entranced at the idea.

"He and Skye have quite a litter," Finn said, but then shook himself. "But we really need to speak to Ryleth. She must know more about what's going on in the Empire if she was leaving there and coming here without alerting us first."

"Indeed." Rohan nodded. "Let us go meet her."

But Finn hesitated. He looked back at his father's room. "I don't like to leave him, but–oh, Miles!"

His stepbrother, unlike Finley who had tromped up the stairs, was slowly creeping up as if to not make himself known. Miles popped up like a Jack-in-the Box at his name being called.

"Oh, I–I didn't mean to disturb anyone. I just heard so much commotion and I–"

"Miles, it's perfect that you're here!" Finn interrupted him.

"It is?" Miles looked shocked that he could be a part of a *perfect* anything.

"Yes, come up here!" Finn gestured for Miles to join him and Rohan. "My father is sleeping–"

"Your father?! You mean the Fae king?" Miles' eyes were huge in his head.

"Yes, he's been attacked. He's recovering," Finn explained.

One of Miles' hands crept up to his throat. "A–attacked? Is he all right?"

"Yes, thanks to Rohan," Finn explained. He hated seeing his stepbrother so fragile. Mention of an "attack" even seemed to shake him. He kept his voice low and kind. "I would ask that you sit with him, Miles, while I go speak to some people. Serxio and a doctor will be here soon, but I don't wish him left alone. He's asleep so you won't have to really do anything. But if he wakes, I want him to have someone there."

Miles nodded rather like a marionette on a string. "I can do that. I can sit!"

Again, Finn hurt hearing that eager patheticness of his stepbrother wanting to prove he could help in some small way. Christopher was on his last nerve with him, and while Finn had asked Serxio to find something for Miles to do, with all the excitement and the guests he doubted that had been accomplished yet. So sitting with his father would be the best thing for both of them.

"And if he–he wakes up? What should I tell him?" Miles asked.

"That I will be back soon. If he wants anything, ask one of the Guards outside to go get it. He may be hungry or thirsty, but I'm guessing he's so exhausted that he won't wake for many hours." Finn patted Miles' left arm. "Could you do this for me?"

"Of course, Finn! I will do my best! I promise!" Miles stumbled out with a small smile.

"Good. Thank you. I know you will." Finn smiled earnestly at him. "Go on in."

Miles turned and went to the bedroom door. He opened it a crack, glanced in, and then when he

assured himself that Thalanil was sleeping, he crept inside in that quiet, unobtrusive way of his, and shut the door behind him.

Finn sighed. "I cannot believe he is the same brother who ordered me to re-shine his shoes."

"That he had you shining his shoes at all is unacceptable," Rohan said darkly.

Finn let out a sad laugh. "Yes, but it's just sad that he's lost all his confidence."

"Maybe it'll be replaced by humility." Rohan had shown pity for Miles, but whenever Finn spoke of how he once had been, that pity faded.

"I just hope he can recover and be happy. Now, let's go see those puppies and Ryleth." Finn took Rohan's arm as they started down the stairs with Leonid and Finley. "Where did you take them, Finley?"

"Ah, we left them in the courtyard as we weren't sure if they were friends or foes. And the pups had to poop after the ride," Finley confessed. "Best to do that out of doors than in."

"You said there was a man with them, Finley, who was he?" Leonid asked his subordinate.

"No idea, sir, but he looked like a skeleton. I think he must have been a beggar… or a prisoner," Finley added the last as an afterthought.

Finn frowned. "I wonder who it could be."

"How did Ryleth get caught up with a prisoner?" Rohan asked.

"There's bound to be quite the story there," Leonid said.

They found out the answer at least to who the man was. For as they exited the castle and entered the courtyard, a very dirty, thin man in tattered clothes that were little more than rags turned his head to face them head on. Even through the long, oily hair, Finn recognized him as did the others.

"Thomas!" Leonid hissed. His sword rang as it cleared his scabbard and the Guard captain had his blade at Thomas' bare throat. "You knave! You murderer!"

"Wait, Leonid, don't kill him!" Ryleth cried as she burst away from the puppies.

"For the gods' sake, Ryleth, why not? He killed Emma!" Leonid shouted.

"Because he helped get me out of the dungeon," she answered with a sigh.

Finn was frowning. "Why do I think whatever actions he took were to help *himself* get out of the dungeon?"

Thomas lowered his head and wouldn't meet Finn's eyes. If he'd needed more proof than his gut, he'd just gotten it.

"He is a murderer, Ryleth," Rohan said solemnly. "He must be punished for that."

"But I didn't kill in your kingdom! You can't punish me for what happened in the Empire!" Thomas gasped.

"You killed our friend," Rohan said quietly. "Most would simply let Leonid slit your neck and be done with it. I recognize what crimes I want to here. I am *king*."

Thomas' shoulders sagged. "Please, I… I can't be locked up again. Not in the dark! Not in the dark! I can't! Ryleth, tell them! Tell them how it was down there!"

Ryleth looked pained. She turned towards Rohan and put her hands together as if in prayer. "I know Thomas is a bad man and he's done plenty to deserve a terrible fate."

"But you want me to show mercy?" Rohan lifted an eyebrow.

She nodded. "I fear that Thomas is mostly like he is because of the things that were done to him, of the wrong lessons he learnt while indebted to the Fae, while serving… *me*, in part. If he is bad, I am partly to blame."

"Ryleth, unless you put some spell of compulsion on him–"

"No, but he was rewarded for being underhanded and a cretin. Any good instinct he had likely just got him less food and more trouble," Ryleth explained. "I'm not saying that he shouldn't pay for Emma's murder, but something other than a cell or a hangman's noose would be my preference. But you are the king and you decide."

Rohan closed his eyes. "I would rather bestow mercy on someone *worthy*." He opened his eyes and focused them on Thomas who quaked under his judgment. "You will not be imprisoned, but you will not be free, Thomas. Once you are recovered, you will serve in whatever capacity I ask of you. I will determine some work or recompense you can do for any of Emma's family, if they still live. If only she were before me instead of you."

Thomas' expression turned from despair to elation. He dropped to his knees and lowered his forehead to the ground. "Thank you, my king! Bless you and keep you always! You are too kind!"

"He bloody well is," Leonid muttered, looking down in disgust at the bowing and scraping of Thomas.

"I only hope that you will live up to the kindness that is, once again, being shown to you," Rohan stated. "Leonid, please have him taken to the servants' quarters. He needs a bath and food."

"As you wish, my king." Leonid bowed. He then said to Thomas, "Get up, you git! Time to make you stop smelling like a walking sewer."

Thomas tottered to his feet and kept bowing and thanking Rohan. Like with Miles, Finn felt a mix of emotions seeing the once proud and rude Thomas brought so low.

He will get more justice and mercy here than he deserves.

"Ryleth, we have not properly greeted you," Finn said as he hugged the Fae priestess.

She laughed at his embrace and hugged him tightly back. "You are a sight for sore eyes, Prince Finrael."

When they broke apart, Rohan offered her a hug, which had her eyes widening, but she accepted it gladly.

"Your people are all wide-eyed at my red eyes and pointed ears. You are very kind to greet me with such warmth and welcome, King Rohan," she said and bowed. "I am grateful beyond words."

"You need not be. You are our friend, Ryleth. You are always welcome wherever we are," Rohan assured her.

Again, she bowed. "You honor me."

"You said you were in a dungeon?" Finn asked when she straightened up once more.

"Oh, yes, I have so much to tell you. There is a coup moving against King Thalanil, involving some of his Council," she said.

"We know," Rohan answered.

She blinked. "You know?"

"The reason we saw you on the road, Ryleth, was because I was coming back with Father. I had just saved him from Marikoth," Finn explained.

"Marikoth was in the Empire? Oh, gods, that is the reason for the cold I felt. He was in the Wyvern Tower, wasn't he?" Ryleth asked, face pale and waxy at the thought.

"Yes, he was. And now he has all of Aymar. All of the Empire. I just managed to save my father from him, but it was a near thing," Finn said and swallowed the emotions that wanted to block his throat and let no more words out.

Rohan put a hand on his shoulder to steady him. He gave the Rirean king a grateful look.

"I'm sorry I could not get the information to you earlier, though not even I knew that Marikoth was behind this. But without Tyreon, both Thomas and I would still be languishing in Aymar's dungeon," Ryleth admitted.

She gestured towards the fluffy bastard who was being petted and given quite a few treats by the Guard. Skye was cadging more for herself, and the pups were practically drowning in bits of dried meat and scratches behind the ears. Upon hearing his name, Tyreon raced over to Finn. Finn dropped to his haunches and embraced the King of the Wolves. He stroked him and hugged him fiercely. After a few more kisses, he rose up and regarded Ryleth with a critical eye.

"While you don't look as bad off as Thomas, you've been ill used, Ryleth. I'm certain you could do with a bath, some food and sleep," Finn said.

"I could do with all of those things and not necessarily in that order!" She laughed. "But, first, though my news may be old, I want to make sure you have all that I know before I do any of those things."

"We can feed you while you talk," Rohan offered generously.

She, just then, noticed the robes. Her eyes widened. "My, my, King Rohan, you do look the part."

But Rohan scowled. "I *hate* these things. They itch."

"I'm sure we have time for you to change first. Your leathers, I presume?" she asked.

"You presume correctly. Come, let's get in and talk," Rohan said.

He offered Finn his arm and the three of them went into the castle followed by Tyreon, Skye and all their roly-poly pups.

A BIGGER BED

Later that evening…

ROHAN STARED AT HIS BED. It was filled with wolves. He put his hands on his hips. He wore only a silk robe and was intending to strip it off and sink beneath the sheets while he awaited for Finn to return to him. Finn was sitting with his father.

The planned big dinner with Queen Artremaya had been put on hold. She hadn't objected. She'd seen the insanity with Thalanil. Instead, she'd thanked him for giving her time to rest. She was a thoughtful person and, he guessed, a very good monarch. Truly nothing had gone to plan today in any way, shape or form. It had started with the discovery of the Dreadbrood beneath his land and it had ended with wolves in his bed.

"You can't stay here," Rohan said to Tyreon, his mate Skye and their six adorable pups.

Tails wagged like furry sails in the wind.

"There's not enough room," Rohan pointed out as he gestured to the fact that the two adult wolves were taking over his and Finn's spaces on the bed while three of the pups were squeezed between them and another three were at their feet.

"There are many, many empty bedrooms that you could occupy. Beds that–while perhaps not quite as nice as this one–will surely be enough for your standards. You sleep on the ground normally after all," Rohan stated. "Unless Thalanil lets you sleep in his bed. And I doubt he does. Because you're not there now."

More tail wagging. One of the white pups at the foot of the bed turned onto his back and exposed his belly to Rohan. Rohan sighed and scratched the adorable, fluffy belly. The pup, of course, wrapped his paws around Rohan's wrist and mouthed his fingers.

"Finn and I will not be sleeping on the floor. It's just not happening. No matter how adorable you are," Rohan told the family of eight.

Skye slow-blinked at him. Her black as midnight tail thumped the bed. Tyreon's tongue lolled out as he smiled at Rohan. All the pups let out soft pants and joyously wiggled on their backs as if all offering their bellies. Rohan managed to resist all that soft fur. He tightened his belt around his waist.

"You can stay here until Finn comes back. And then you must move. I know you understand me," Rohan told them. "The bed is ours. We are not surrendering it to you!"

He turned with an exasperated sigh and headed over to his desk. He poured himself a glass of wine and leaned back in the chair. He pushed all the documents aside that he'd had his secretary gather for him. They went back hundreds of years and laid out all the help that his family had given the Kingdom of Sultane. It was a large pile, but it looked small compared to what they'd done for Bolan who had often needed their help militarily against aggressors from the sea.

He grimaced and pushed the piles away from him. Playing tit for tat was not what he wanted to do. They had not helped out of a hope for anything but peace and good feelings. They did not seek payment for their past acts. But Rirea had always been prosperous and strong.

Until now.

He thought he heard the flap of wyvern wings outside his window. Silver Soul had agreed to monitor the Empire. She might not notice the Wall coming down, but she would know if Marikoth came back this way.

And if he does? Even without an army, what can I do to stop him?

Finn seemed convinced he could take Marikoth. But that was based upon one encounter in a dream where the Death Mage had not known what Finn could do. Marikoth would be prepared this time for them, but they had no rabbits up their sleeves against him. They did not know how to use their powers either singularly or together. Rohan sensed that there were incredible possibilities for them to work together. But he did not know how. Finn did not know how. Would Thalanil have any ideas? Would he share them if he did? Ryleth might have some ideas.

After checking on Thalanil, along with the university professors that Serxio had brought over, Ryleth had bathed and eaten. She'd told them all of her adventures after that. But the one book she'd located was taken from her. And Finn had shifted uncomfortably when she said that it had been vague about Death Mages.

"That's all right. That may not be useful. Unless it is to go against Marikoth," Finn had said.

Ryleth blinked. "Not useful? You are a Death Mage, Finrael. Or have I missed something?"

Finn had not responded at first but then said with a dismissive wave, "I don't know how to use my powers. Unless that book had instructions, I don't see that it would help us much."

"Well, perhaps all of that material down in the crypt will give us a better idea. Head Librarian Crosly has already invited me to join the other academics in reviewing all the material," Ryleth said, her red eyes gleaming. "I have to say it is so refreshing to work with scholars again. To have everything be open to questions and investigation. I'm quite thrilled to be a part of it, even if they all are a little frightened of me."

"They're all fascinated, Ryleth. Or fascinated as well as frightened," Rohan amended. "My uncle… Well, it was not just him who gave Fae a bad name in Rirea."

She nodded. "I don't think that's new, Rohan. We've earned some of our reputation at least."

"If anyone is rude to you in any way, please let me know. Or Serxio or Leonid. It will not be allowed," Rohan said sternly.

She let out a delighted laugh. "I have never felt so honored! I am certain everything will be fine. Crosly and the others seem genuinely interested in the Fae. I truly feel if there is to be a rapprochement that it will come by us speaking to one another openly. Sometimes rudely. We must all be open to that."

Finn had broken in then with, "If in your reading you come across the terms *Death's Chosen* or *Dreadbrood*, please let me know immediately."

She lifted her eyebrows. "There's clearly a story behind this!"

Finn's eyes had flickered to his and back to hers. "Not a story. Or perhaps just the outline of one really. I promise I'll explain, but not now. I need to get back to my father. Miles is doing a rather lovely job of keeping watch over him–and even talking to him when he wakes–but I know he's anxious when he doesn't have me near."

"Of course," Ryleth agreed. "I quite understand. I do want to assure you both that from what I can see, Rohan, you restored him. He's sleeping simply out of normal tiredness and grief, I would imagine."

She had magically given Thalanil a thorough exam. Rohan was so glad that what he'd done had worked. It wasn't as if there was a book that told him what to do.

"My grandfather and Shadeheart are both gone. Marikoth is such a bastard!" Finn growled at the last.

Rohan caught Finn's nearest hand and squeezed it. "I'm so sorry, Finn."

"I didn't even get to meet my grandfather and Shadeheart was innocent!" Finn shook his head. "We must find some way to make him pay for this!"

"If there is a way to be found, Finrael, I am certain we will find it," Ryleth promised.

There was a soft knock on his door, drawing Rohan out of his thoughts.

"Come!" he called without asking who it was first.

The Guards would not allow anyone he would not see to knock, in any case. Lightbringer was in its scabbard, leaning against the mantle beside him if he needed assistance. His uncle came into the room. Rohan's stomach flipped and his chest tightened. His uncle had made himself very scarce since Queen Artremaya had arrived and he'd been practically a ghost since Thalanil had come. Now Rohan was the ghost, unable to speak, unable to start a conversation with his uncle when he did not know what he wished to say. Or maybe he had too many things to say.

"Rohan?" Hugues asked.

He'd actually been standing in front of Rohan's desk for some time, waiting to be acknowledged.

He shook himself. The day had truly been long. He gestured for Hugues to sit.

"Some wine?" Rohan asked.

"Yes, please." Hugues smiled benevolently. He must have caught sight of the bodies in Rohan's bed, because he asked, "Are those *wolves*?"

"Yes, don't you recognize Tyreon? He chased you back to Reave Castle not that long ago," Rohan said dryly. "That is his family."

"Ah." His uncle looked faint but said nothing further.

Tyreon did not lift his head at Hugues' entrance. He was sure, though, that the great wolf knew Hugues was there. But he would not dishonor Rohan by attacking his kin.

Rohan poured the wine, grateful to have something to do, which would delay their discussion. But once the wine was poured and they had both taken appreciative sips, his uncle led the discussion, "I heard what happened today with Thalanil. He's lost the Empire to Marikoth."

"The grapevine is doing its work, I see," Rohan said. He really should ask Serxio if questioning the servants had led to any information on his uncle.

"Yes, it always does." Hugues smiled, but that smile quickly died. "Marikoth will not be content to remain behind the Wall."

"No, he will not."

"Have you thought of what you will do if that happens?" Hugues asked.

"I have."

"And have you–"

"I'm still working on a plan," Rohan said. "Why don't you tell me everything you know about Marikoth?"

"I felt for him." Hugues tilted his wine glass back and forth.

"Because you knew what it was like to want to wear the crown, but be denied it? In your case, birth order. In his case, being what he is," Rohan's voice was sharp.

"I never wanted the throne. I was happy to be your father's advisor and yours," Hugues said.

"After everything you've done–"

"Everything I've done is because of the sense of dread and doom that is upon me and all of us every single day, Rohan. The end is coming quite swiftly now," Hugues interrupted him. "I'm not sure anything can reverse it."

Rohan thought of the Dreadbrood. They must be under his land for a reason. And there must be a reason that they started to drain and poison the land. It had not begun with his birth or his parents' births. It was *before* then.

When Thalanil took the throne? No, before then, too. What if it began when Marikoth was born? The Dreadbrood is the one army who can face him and not be used to fuel his magic.

"What do you know about the Death's Chosen?" Rohan asked.

Hugues stilled. "Finn told you about that? I'm surprised he did. I got the distinct impression he

had no desire for you to know."

"Finn fears it means that he and I are not destined to be together. He is wrong, of course. I love him and only him. I am complete when he is near," Rohan found himself saying. "Finn is not trying to hide some kind of darkness inside himself from me."

"But what if there was? Darkness inside of him?" Hugues asked.

"There is none. When he uses his magic, he does so to protect and defend. When he attacks it is out of righteous fury. Not some twisted evil," Rohan answered with complete certainty.

"Perhaps you are right. But, regardless, now that Marikoth has taken the Empire, he may be what we need," Hugues said.

"Explain."

"Finn took the book I was reading–"

"As was his right."

Hugues held up a hand and nodded as if in agreement. "I was startled to see him. He is so like Maeve and then…"

"Also like his father. Who is here. Now. And Thalanil is *not* to be molested or harassed in any way. Is that clear?" Rohan stared at his uncle until the old man nodded reluctantly again.

What must it be like for his uncle to have his greatest enemy under the same roof? To have that enemy dethroned and helpless? He could only imagine Hugues' desire to gloat over it all. His position might be precarious, but Thalanil had lost nearly everything.

"The books say that gods became jealous of the Aeturnals and they sought to undermine them," Hugues explained.

"Yes, yes, and we lost everything but Rirea," Rohan said, making a get-on-with-it gesture with his hand.

"I don't think it was *only* the Aeturnals that the gods were jealous of. All of the Fae flouted their immortality, beauty and great power. They did not worship the gods so much as themselves and each other," Hugues went on. "The Aeturnals were the Fae's great defenders. With them in charge, the Fae were protected even from the gods' wrath. After they were removed, things started to slide. The land became hostile. The very life that it generated choked them while starving others."

"I hear nothing about Death's Chosen–"

"In the end, it is Death's Chosen who will come to finish what the gods started. To wipe everyone who inhabits the lands that the Aeturnals once ruled clean of all life," Hugues said.

The pop and crack of the fire were the only sounds for long moments before Rohan asked, "And you honestly think that *Finn* would do that?"

"I–"

"Finn? Who wouldn't let me execute that loathsome stepfather? Who loves his stepbrothers even though they treated him worse than a slave? Finn's greatest fear is that he will hurt someone who doesn't deserve it, or maybe even someone who *does!*" Rohan's voice rose with every statement. "I

thought you had great judgment when it came to men's hearts, but if you believe any of that for a second–"

"Sometimes fate is not kind," Hugues interrupted.

"Finn would never hurt me. He would not hurt–"

"Marikoth? I hope you say he would. For it cannot be a coincidence that Marikoth takes the throne and Death's Chosen is here, can it?" Hugues challenged.

They stared at one another for a while then both of them looked away. Rohan swirled his wine, having lost the taste for it at some point. Hugues drained his glass finally.

"I shall take my leave. It is late. And the day has been long." Hugues stood.

"That is best," Rohan's voice sounded dull to his own ears.

Suddenly, Hugues' right hand was on his shoulder. "I know you don't believe me when I say this, but I love you, Rohan, and everything I do is because of that." He squeezed. "Goodnight, nephew."

Rohan said nothing as Hugues left. He buried his face in his hands and just stayed there, not really thinking of anything, just feeling the weight of all the decisions he had to make and all the questions which he did not have answers to. There was a soft "woof" and he felt a cold nose pressed against his bare leg. He looked down into Tyreon's beautiful red eyes. They seemed to be filled with such understanding, such sadness for him. The King of the Wolves nosed his hand so that he lifted it and put it on top of Tyreon's fluffy head. Immediately, those red eyes half shut.

"You think petting you will make me feel better, huh?" Rohan asked.

He scratched between those large ears. He found himself turning round in his seat and using both hands to scritch the wolf's ruff and between his ears and along his back. Tyreon's eyes completely shut after a time and Rohan felt his shoulders ease. Some of the tension bled from his body and he was smiling.

"Okay, you were right. I feel much better." He kissed Tyreon between the ears and the wolf let out another soft "woof."

Tyreon's tail swept across the floor.

"You're so wise, aren't you? A king in your own right," Rohan said.

Tyreon "woofed" again and headed back into the bedroom to join his family. But Rohan was not alone for long because Finn came back to their rooms. He felt his heart lift as soon as he saw that fair face. Finn's green eyes lit up upon seeing him as well.

Rohan rose from the desk and was moving towards the Fae prince without saying a word. Finn ran into his arms and they simply embraced. He buried his face in Finn's hair. He smelled of roses and fresh winds.

When they broke apart, though their hands did not leave one another, Rohan asked, "How is your father?"

Finn let out a breath. "Better. I think." He sagged against the edge of the desk. "I can't believe I'm saying this, but Miles was truly a help. He coaxed Father to eat something. Thalanil even allowed

Miles to brush his hair. Miles loves beautiful things and Father is–"

"Very beautiful," Rohan finished for him.

Finn nodded. "Miles has convinced him to even allow Milius to come tomorrow to take his measurements for some clothing."

Rohan snorted as he thought of the tailor being confronted with King Thalanil Ravenspar. For unlike him, who resented every frilly thing that Milius wanted to dress him in, Thalanil might actually accept it. "Milius will likely think he has died and gone to the heavens."

"I think so. Serxio was practically in raptures himself." Finn rubbed his temples.

Rohan clasped his shoulders. "You are exhausted."

"But I hardly did anything," Finn let out a soft laugh. "I just sat there. And we didn't even try and restore any land–"

"Tomorrow. We'll try tomorrow somewhere else," Rohan assured him.

"But the Dreadbrood. What if by restoring the land, we're just feeding them?" Finn asked.

"That is a possibility. But they haven't drained the castle grounds. So perhaps it would be all right if we did something a little further away," Rohan said. "The King of Bolan should be arriving in the next day or so as well. We will have much to do. You will need your strength for that."

Finn leaned against him, smiling up at him. "I was hoping that we might make love before we rested."

Immediately, Rohan's body took notice even as his soul soared. "I think I could be convinced to do that. I have a little strength left."

Finn grinned. He hopped up and took Rohan's hands in his. He led Rohan into the bedroom. It was only when he saw the edge of the bed that he remembered the wolves.

"Ah, Tyreon and–"

"Oh, Rohan, look at them!" Finn gave out a laugh.

Rohan groaned. "I told them that when you got back they had to be off the–"

"They are standing as if for a family portrait!" Finn laughed.

Indeed, Tyreon and Skye were standing with their pups by the side of the bed. The pups were practically falling over with sleepiness. Their parents nosed them awake and upright. Finn dropped down on his knees before them. He wrapped his arms around the whole family.

"Oh, you wonderful wolves!" Finn enthused.

Rohan watched as Finn stroked, kissed and cooed at the wolves. They relished his attention. Tyreon and Skye looked over at him. His shoulders slumped.

"The wolves were sleeping on the bed, but–"

"Oh! Do they want to sleep with us?" Finn looked over his shoulder hopefully at Rohan and then back to the wolves.

"I believe they do," Rohan answered dryly as Tyreon's tail swished. "But I thought *you* wanted to make love. You don't feel strange doing so in front of–of them?"

“Well,” Finn glanced at Tyreon and Skye. Like with Silver Soul, he appeared able to understand the wolves, too. “Oh, it’s all good! They’ll go downstairs and get something to eat and come back when we’re all ready to go to bed.”

“So they’ve thought this all out, have they?” Rohan lifted an eyebrow at Tyreon who swish-swished that tail. “It’ll be very cozy. But it’s only *temporary*.”

Finn’s head lowered. “Yes, if we can take back the Empire, I suppose they’ll have their home again, too.”

Rohan gritted his teeth, but then let out a soft laugh. “Yes, I suppose that’s true, too. But I actually meant that, in the meantime, I would have a bigger bed built. So we can all sleep in the bed.”

Tyreon’s tail thumped happily.

LIFE MAKING

They sent the wolves out to get some food from the kitchens. As much as Finn was happy to share the bed with their fluffy friends, he didn't want them there when he and Rohan made love. Still, Rohan was staring at the bed and muttering something about "dog hair" as he brushed it down. Finn couldn't help smiling as he watched Rohan–who was normally not fastidious at all–remake the bed.

"You don't mind if they sleep with us later, do you?" Finn wrapped his arms around Rohan's waist and rested his cheek against his lover's broad back.

Rohan covered Finn's hands with his own. "No, of course not. Especially considering how happy I can tell it makes you." Rohan turned around in his arms so that they were face to face. "And you're beaming."

Finn was beaming. "After everything that's happened today, Tyreon, Skye and their pups are a bright spot."

"A *hairy* bright spot, but yes, they are." Rohan smiled.

"Thank you for letting them stay with us and for that new bed," Finn quickly told him.

"No thanks are needed." Rohan smoothed a hand through Finn's hair. "If you're tired, Finn, we can just sleep. We don't need to do anything–"

"But I wish to!" Finn perked up. "I didn't use any magic today. You were the one who did all the work. You saved Father. I know he was so awful about it–"

"He's lost everything but you. Of course he wants to protect you from everyone," Rohan assured him. "I did not take it personally." Then with an impish smile he added, "Besides, we know he hates me for other reasons. Namely, that you love me."

Finn let out a startled laugh. "That's not funny, but I can't help it! Oh, gods, everything is such a mess!"

"It is," Rohan said slowly, but his brows drew together, "and yet everything that's happening doesn't feel like it could be a coincidence."

Finn considered this. "I see what you mean."

"I'm surprised your father did not want to storm Aymar immediately," Rohan said. "He is so

powerful."

"What happened with Marikoth showed him that his strength is his weakness. His great power is simply food to my uncle, who can use that to fuel terrible magics against him and all of us." Finn shook his head. "He's shaken to his core, Rohan. I do not know him as well as I would like, but even I can see that he's completely flattened by this."

"He thought himself safe behind his Wall." There was a slightly bitter note in Rohan's voice.

Finn could not blame him for that. While the people of Rirea suffered–both out of sight and out of mind for the Fae–his father and all citizens of the Empire had flourished. At least in comparison, though they knew that things had hardly been perfect there.

"As much as Father was king and inhabited that role, I never got the sense that he wanted it. It was a duty that he took on. Something a Ravenspar must do," Finn murmured against Rohan's chest. "I think he always expected Marikoth to be the one to take the throne, but then…"

"Yes, *then*."

"And now Marikoth has it."

"Will the people of the Empire simply accept Marikoth striding in, killing his own father, attempting to kill his brother and then taking the throne?" Rohan sounded dubious and outraged.

Finn thought of what both his father and Ryleth had told him about the players supporting Marikoth. "He's been planning this for who knows how long. He's cultivated the right people. The leaders of their religion. The ones that control the Council. The disparate parts of the Ravenspar family tree that were never going to get their chance at power," Finn listed out. "Marikoth is not just saying: support me, because I'm the rightful heir. He's saying–"

"Support me and I will give you all you want," Rohan finished.

"Exactly." Finn grimaced. "And I do not think I was a benefit to my father either."

"But you and Marikoth are *both* Death Mages so how can they hold that against you?"

"It's not the Death Mage part. I mean… it probably is, though I showed them that a Death Mage can save them when no one else can, or at least Death Magic can." Finn grew silent for a moment, but then pushed on as thinking on what he truly was would lead nowhere now, "I think it's the human part."

"Human–"

"Father loved my mother desperately. The only reason he didn't marry her and make her queen was the overwhelming pressure from the people that he not take a human-looking queen," Finn explained. "She had Fae blood. There's a lot of it in our family tree from what I understand, but she looked human. I look human. And that was enough to make the Fae reject us both."

Rohan's lips flattened. "Yes, I think you may be right. Considering how humans are treated in the Empire, I highly doubt they want humans ruling them. Thomas may be a criminal and reprobate, but the treatment he received in the Empire did not help his character."

"No, humans are seen as lesser, at best, if they are noticed at all. Though I think little of titles, the

very fact that my title of Crown Prince could not completely make those I met even attempt to hide their shock and disgust…" Finn pressed his lips together. "Well, I believe that says it all."

"Marikoth may look like the Fae, but he cares not for them. His looks certainly won't make him a good ruler," Rohan said.

"That's probably putting it mildly."

"They'll need to be rescued and I cannot believe they will care if the people who do it have pointed ears and red eyes or rounded ears and green ones," Rohan pointed out with a caress of Finn's cheek. "Thalanil will need our help to defeat Marikoth and take back the Empire." His gaze was intent on Finn. "And if we give it…"

"Do we ask for something in return?" Finn guessed. "You are wondering if I think we should ask for something."

"I am. I would offer the help regardless, but while the Deathbrood beneath our feet may be the cause of some of Rirea's decline, it cannot be the problem with the Empire, Sultane or Bolan."

"You are considering if Marikoth and the myths are right? That the true cause of all this harm is the breaking up of the old Aeturnal Empire?"

"I am."

"But if that is right, then the Empire must not only be restored, but an Aeturnal must rule it." Finn did not make that a question.

"With his Bonded One." Rohan stroked his hair. "I have no desire for more people or land to rule–"

"I know you don't. If we could restore Rirea through any other means, you would. But I fear you are right. All of this is connected. One cannot be saved without the other." Finn fisted his hands in Rohan's robe. "Most rulers would jump at this excuse to increase their power, but not you."

"And not you. But this is where we are. If the populace of the Empire wasn't keen on a human-looking Crown Prince, what would they think of dual kings who are part-human?" Rohan asked.

Finn let out a huff of laughter. "I suppose it serves them right for being prejudiced in the first place."

"We'll show them by ruling them fairly and justly. Terrible punishment."

"Terrible indeed." Finn grinned.

"But after losing the Empire to Marikoth, I do not know if your father will even consider this as a solution unless we make it part of the deal," Rohan sighed. "I simply doubt we have time to convince him."

"And that is assuming he would listen with an open mind. Truly, why would he? What ruler would simply give up their lands on the words of dusty tomes? Few, if any."

"And he's not the only one we would have to convince," Rohan reminded him softly.

"No, he's not." Finn scrubbed his hands over his face. "But I'm not sure how to speak to Father about this. He's in a state of disbelief, shock and grief. He hardly spoke at all when I was with him

for all those hours. Even when he slept, he kept hold of my hand as if afraid I would disappear on him," Finn said with a shake of his head.

Rohan kissed his right temple. "It is hard to see such a proud Fae being brought low."

"Yes, it is."

Rohan tightened his hold on Finn and rocked them, humming under his breath. Finn closed his eyes and relished the connection and closeness he felt. He experienced a stab of guilt when he'd left Thalanil, but he needed this. Rohan was his anchor. His port in these powerful storms. They needed to refresh each other in order to be strong for everyone else.

Rohan turned his head as if listening to something outside of the room.

"What?" Finn asked, not hearing anything himself.

"I thought I heard the ticking of claws," Rohan said.

"The wolves!" Finn realized with alarm.

"They could be back any moment, wanting their places in the bed, leaving us no room to sleep, let alone make love." Rohan looked alarmed.

Finn blinked. He was certain that Tyreon would know to steer clear until they were done, but he and Skye did have sleepy pups to consider. And they might not see why they had to be separated from them by a door or walls simply because he and Rohan were doing what was natural by making love.

"I don't think we should waste another second," Finn said.

"Nor do I." Rohan smiled seductively.

Finn tilted his head up so that he could reach Rohan's lips. The kiss was electric. There was that *zing* of power that sparked between them. It seemed stronger tonight than before. Finn let out a moan as the kiss deepened and Rohan feathered one hand through the hair at the back of his head. There was a hunger between them as if they hadn't touched in ages rather than just that morning.

Rohan swept Finn up into his arms and laid him upon the center of the bed without breaking the kiss. He kneeled between Finn's thighs while his hands fisted in the covers on either side of Finn's head. Rohan's robe had already come undone. Finn hungrily looked at the lean, muscular body suspended above him. Rohan's cock was already engorged and lovely. Heat bloomed between Finn's legs as his own cock stirred to life.

Rohan shrugged off the silk robe. It fluttered onto the bed and he was completely nude. He moved to disrobe Finn just as completely. Finn had only to toe off his boots and Rohan had already undone the buttons of his shirt. He spread it open to reveal Finn's chest. The cool air had his nipples peaking and his stomach muscles tightening. Rohan's head dipped down as he drew each nub into his mouth, one after another, and sucked hard. Finn's breath came in shuddery gasps and he was pushing at the waistband of his leggings. He wanted to feel Rohan's bare skin against his own.

Rohan kissed down his stomach. Finn drew in a sharp breath with every teasing touch. Rohan's fingers dipped beneath the waistband of his leggings and slipped them down to his knees, but not all the way off. Finn gave him a questioning look. Rohan grinned up at him as his mouth got dangerously

close to Finn's cock.

"I'm keeping you bound. Just a little," Rohan teased.

Finn's eyes widened. "But–oh!"

Words were stolen from him as Rohan's mouth fastened on the head of his cock. Rohan's tongue swept over his cockhead and slit, lapping up the precum that had already pooled there. Finn tried to open his legs further, tried to bring them up to urge Rohan to take in more of him. But the leggings restricted his movements and he merely shifted helplessly as Rohan licked and sucked leisurely along his length.

Heat flowed out of his core. Every touch of Rohan's tongue against his sensitive sex sent a wave of it that filled him from the top of his head to his toes. His cheeks flushed and perspiration broke out across his brow. He felt on fire. When Rohan swallowed half of his cock down the tight embrace of his mouth and throat made Finn's fingers and toes tingle. He keened and thrashed his head. Rohan sank down further until his lower lip was pressed against Finn's balls. Rohan swallowed again. Finn beat the back of his head against the pillows.

He could not contain what he was feeling. His body jerked as if electricity was running through it. Rohan pressed his tongue along the vein at the back of his cock as he pulled off of it and then immediately sank down again. Finn let out a groan. He thought he heard something rip. He wasn't sure if it was leggings or the sheets beneath his fingertips.

Finn's balls had drawn tight against his body. His cock was on fire. He needed release. He needed it in a way he couldn't imagine needing anything more. Rohan sucked hard on his manhood and Finn saw stars. His hands left the sheets and fisted in Rohan's thick, dark hair. He wasn't guiding Rohan's movements so much as holding on as the Rirean king owned his body in ways that he couldn't quite express. He was Rohan's instrument. Like his father had been restored to full health, Rohan was putting life into Finn. Light into darkness. Bringing him alive.

He imagined himself in complete and total darkness with the love and desire inside of him as light. His body started to glow in the dark as Rohan pumped Finn's cock in and out of that clever mouth. Finn arched up from the bed, but Rohan controlled him, kept him still. His mouth opened and he imagined light pouring out of it as if there were a miniature sun inside of him. With every touch, he felt Rohan's love for him. He was treasured beyond any measure.

His orgasm crested. He felt the need to scream it out into the very air. His lips parted and he cried out. The imagined darkness was blasted away by the light roaring out of him. The light was spreading and spreading and spreading. It poured out of their rooms and spilled into the hall, filled this floor and overflowed down to the next and next. It touched every person in Reave Castle. Finn knew that his father's eyelids flew open at the touch of it and the Fae king gasped as his eyes glowed red with power and magic. The light kept going.

The castle grounds were soaked with the light. More plants erupted in the rose garden. The fruit trees burst forth with flowers and fruit. Vegetables plumped and ripened. Wheat grew tall. The

vineyard's vines became heavy with dark purple grapes.

That night many couples found love that would last a long, healthy lifetime. More babies were conceived than ever before and those children would be blessed with strange and wondrous gifts. The whole of Reave Castle, down to its Aymar roots, pulsed with life and the possibility of growth and change.

Finn collapsed on the bed. Spent. Damp hair curling around his brow. His body was as limp as a dishrag. Rohan slowly drew off his cock causing Finn's breathing to stutter as the sensitive organ was touched. The Rirean king removed Finn's very ripped leggings. He kissed up Finn's thighs then slowly made his way up his stomach and chest before reaching Finn's mouth. They kissed lazily. Finn could taste himself on Rohan's tongue and lips. An earthy yet citrus taste. Rohan broke off and kissed his temple as he wrapped his arms around Finn's body.

"Did that–that happen?" Finn whispered. "The light?"

Rohan's lips were in his hair, kissing him still. "I saw it. I wonder if others did."

"Father did."

He felt Rohan freeze for a moment before he went back to kissing Finn. "Well, he will know that I have not kept away from his little boy then."

Finn smiled broadly. "That's true. But he will also understand why we are together. That we are meant."

"Yes, maybe he will understand our magic, too. Maybe he will try to help us harness it," Rohan suggested.

Finn hoped that was true. Marikoth's knowledge was the one thing that kept Finn from being certain he could defeat his uncle. Sheer power was one thing, but not if it was used crudely as a cudgel like he used his. And this strength he and Rohan had together, surely it could do more than restore land and people. The fact that it happened most powerfully when they made love seemed impractical to use it against their enemies. Finn guessed there was another way. If only they knew how. Rohan stroked his back and sent those ever present thoughts skittering away. Now was the time to focus on just them.

"Just a moment and I will be ready to give you the same release you gave me. Maybe we'll light up the night sky this time," Finn offered even as he felt like he could sink into sleep within a moment.

"You already gave me mine. I had it with you. I could feel everything you did," Rohan admitted.

"Truly, but–"

There was a soft "woof" and both of them saw a white tail, raised like a banner waving in the wind, round the end of their bed towards the side nearest Rohan. Tyreon put his front paws on the bed. In his mouth was a wet towel. He put it on the bed and nosed it towards Rohan.

"What the… Ah! The wolf brought something to clean up with," Rohan chuckled. "Clever, fluffy bastard."

"How do you suppose he got that?" Finn wondered. "By having a staff member give it to him?

Though how would he get them to understand? Or–or did he just get it by himself?"

"That is a fascinating question," Rohan admitted. "But however he did it, he has redeemed himself."

Tyreon smiled as Rohan petted him. He then took the towel and began to clean them both off. Finn hummed as Rohan wiped him off thoroughly. His cock even started to harden again from the ministrations, but his eyes did not wish to remain open, so he looked at Rohan out of half-closed lids. Rohan cleaned himself too before tossing the cloth somewhere out of sight for them to deal with tomorrow. He drew Finn firmly against his chest, cradling Finn's head against him. He brought the blankets up around them both.

Not that they needed them.

Because within moments there were the tick of many claws and the owners of those claws lightly hopped up onto the bed. Soon they had a wolf on either side of them. Tyreon by Rohan and Skye by Finn. The pups were arrayed by their legs.

"It looks like neither of us is going anywhere anytime soon," Rohan laughed.

Finn cuddled against Rohan's chest. "I don't think I mind. I don't intend to go anywhere. I want to stay here with you. Always."

"Always." Rohan kissed his temple again.

As they drifted to sleep–them and the wolves–Finn began to dream. He dreamed of the light that had poured out of him had flowed out and gone down far enough to reach the Dreadbrood. The absolute inky darkness that surrounded them was suddenly lit by a single mote of light. That light mote floated over the heads of the many sleeping monsters. Their eyes were still closed as the light passed over them. But then the light stopped over the head of a massive creature, a wolf that stood upright like a man. The light mote dropped down onto the wolfman's head and sank into the skull. Darkness ruled again.

Except for the creature's suddenly open, glowing, blue-white eyes.

NEW POSSIBILITIES

The sun was just peeking above the horizon as Thalanil sipped his tea on the balcony, a fur blanket around his shoulders. Miles came over and adjusted the blanket so that it covered more of him before sitting back down himself. The young man was colder than he was. He had offered for Miles to stay inside, but Miles insisted on being by him.

"I promised Finn I would," Miles had answered slightly mulishly and kept to his side.

After the disturbance the night before–for what else was he to call the wave of power that had swamped him and the whole castle–he had not been able to fall back asleep. Truthfully, he had not *needed* to sleep. He felt super-charged. He had gone from being near death to the most powerful he had been in his life in less than one rise and set of the sun.

"Lord Lemos promised that he would bring the tailor, Milius, to see you today," Miles said with eagerness. "You will need appropriate clothes for–for your time here. I'm sure that Finn will want you properly outfitted."

Thalanil's lips flattened slightly. He wanted to tell the young man that he would not be staying here. He would be returning to the Empire. *His Empire*. He would take back his throne. He would crush his brother and those who had stood beside him in this betrayal! He would… The delicate cup broke in his hand and hot tea pooled in his palm.

"Oh! No! You're hurt! Let me help you!" Miles cried as he jumped from his seat and grabbed a napkin.

"It's all right. I am fine–"

"You're bleeding!" Miles protested as he took the broken tea cup from him and desperately wrapped Thalanil's injured hand with the napkin.

"I can fix that," Thalanil whispered and the wound was healed. His powers were extreme even for him.

"It's–it's gone!" Miles gasped as he cleaned the blood from the suddenly unwounded hand.

"Yes, I am not some fragile flower," Thalanil said, his lips writhing back from his teeth, but then he remembered he was talking to a young human who wanted nothing more than to serve him and his son. "I–I appreciate your concern, but I am perfectly well and capable."

"Yes, of course, King Thalanil," Miles agreed, nodding way too much for it to be anything less than fear or a nervous tick. Maybe both.

Regret seized him. Being angry with Miles was like beating a puppy. It was utterly wrong. But he knew that Miles was also Finn's stepbrother, one who had not been kind to him. Yet Finn had trusted Miles with his care. He knew his son loved him, so he would not trust lightly. But his rage was so great that it burned like a sun inside of him.

His brother had killed their father. Had drained Shadeheart to nothingness. Had taken his throne. Had corrupted his people. And he did not believe for one moment that Marikoth intended to be a good ruler. He was sick as their father had said. Not sick enough to die, but sick in his mind, in his soul. There was nothing left inside of him of the elder brother he had once known and adored. It had been like seeing some terrible parody of Marikoth brought back to life. Whatever Marikoth intended, it would end in wrack and ruin and who knew how many people dead.

"You and your brother," Thalanil began.

"Christopher," Miles offered helpfully.

Thalanil nodded. "Finrael has brought both of you to the castle under King Rohan's protection?"

"Oh, yes! Finn has been very good to us," Miles babbled out nervously. He was looking down instead of looking shyly at him. "We don't deserve it, but… but he's very kind. You know that, though. He's your son."

"He did not get his kindness from me," Thalanil stated.

He kept thinking of the wave of power that had spread out from what must have been Rohan's bedroom. It had filled the castle with light. The scent of roses had perfumed the air. It was like the first day of spring and a high summer day had met and mated into something spectacular. His skin still sparked from the experience.

What does this mean?

Though he was loath to admit it, it was proof that Rohan and Finrael's relationship was not ordinary. Maybe it was even *meant*. His heart twisted at this. He wanted Finrael to be happy. He wanted his son to have a worthy partner. But a De Clare? An Aeturnal heir?

But he has the old blood. The Aeturnals are destined to return. Would it not be fitting that he should love my son? Marry my son? Join the two great lines again? Some might call it fate. So why does it feel so unfair?

Thalanil still thrummed with anger at Rohan's parents. They had betrayed him! He had treated them as close friends. He had trusted them with his deepest thoughts and feelings. And they seemingly had done the same. He had thought that, though they were mortals, he could trust them to be allies. He had been wrong on all counts. So could he trust the offspring of such traitors?

Rohan had saved him. The young king had shown him and those like Miles and Christopher nothing but kindness. He was surprisingly patient for someone brought up as mortal. The people who served him also showed respect. Did that not show he was worthy of giving a chance?

Yes, it likely did. But part of him had to admit that he was jealous. He wanted his son to himself. But he had to share him with Rohan. He had not had the years of Finrael growing up. He hadn't gotten to see his son run to him on chubby legs with arms outstretched to be picked up and spun. He hadn't gotten to hear Finrael's first word or see the joy of his first spell. Every birthday. Every holiday. Every milestone. Stolen and gone forever. The least he could ask for was time alone with his son. Couldn't he? Was it really too much to ask?

But that is wrong. I know it is. Love is not a finite commodity. It is not a pie that can be reduced by cutting out slices. It is infinite.

"Finn said you lost your–your father. I did not get a chance to say yet how sorry I am," Miles said, fiddling with the bit of bread on his plate.

"Yes, thank you," Thalanil answered dully. "He died trying to protect me."

"So he loved you very much then," Miles stated rather than asked.

Thalanil swallowed. His father's shame and regret for how he had treated Marikoth had obsessed him. It had overshadowed any love he had for Thalanil. He likely had thought that Thalanil was "fine" because he still had their homes, their money, their power and then the throne. Ironically, now he had none of those things, but he felt less alone because he had Finrael.

"I just lost my father, too, but… he's not dead. I don't think he is. But he's gone. Gone away forever," Miles stopped speaking and looked strangely ashamed and saddened.

"Humans know their time is limited on this plane," Thalanil said, "but, I imagine, it does not make the blow of losing them easier."

"I think I lost my father long ago. He was never a–a kind man. But there was a short time when my stepmother was alive where it seemed like…" Miles bit his lower lip. "Seemed like things could be better."

Stepmother? He's speaking of Maeve. Good gods that she ever married a human like Finrael's stepfather.

"Finn and King Rohan sent Father away. He'd become cruel and not himself. It was best," Miles' voice was so soft. "He'd become a monster." Miles glanced over at him. "Your brother… Did he become a monster too?"

"Yes," Thalanil answered honestly. "Whoever Marikoth is now, he is not the brother I loved, and who loved me, anymore."

"You wonder if you could have stopped it. If there was something you could have done. Been better. Been… I don't know. I tried everything to make him come back and be himself, but Father wouldn't," Miles admitted. A tear fell from his left eye and he quickly swiped it away. "Christopher wants me to forget Father. Forget that there was a time when he wasn't a monster. That I need to just move on. But I keep thinking that I've done something to earn this."

Thalanil lightly touched Miles' nearest arm. "I can assure you that you have done nothing wrong, Miles."

"But how can you be sure? You haven't known me very long and I've changed. I'm trying to change," Miles admitted.

Thalanil gave him a sad smile. "Because you're asking that question. No one who is capable of twisting another like that would ever ask that question or care if they had done it."

Miles gave him a small, watery smile. "I wish I could be like Finn or Christopher. Finn is naturally kind and brave. Even as he exiled Father, he still felt pity for him, but now he has moved beyond him. Christopher is very logical. Father hurt us. Father was not going to change. Father has been exiled. Father does not matter anymore. But I'm not like either of them. I still feel like I'm back there in the Manor with him while he's rampaging…"

Miles shuddered. Thalanil petted his arm again. That seemed to help the young man.

"It will take time, but those memories will fade. You'll realize that you are no longer there. That the way things were is not the way things are. And, while there is loss in that, there is also the possibility of something better," Thalanil told him and felt a ray of light open within himself at those words. Talking to Miles felt a bit like talking to himself. Could there be possibilities here in these terrible circumstances?

Miles smiled. "Things are better here. There's less yelling. The food is so good. People are kind and patient with me. Milius has offered to let me help him with his tailoring. Finn is, of course, always so thoughtful about me."

"And your brother Christopher, is he good to you as well?"

Miles sniffed. "He is as good as he can be. We are like oil and water. And he's very set in his ways and strict about things like making noise or all that."

Thalanil guessed that Christopher did not suffer fools gladly. "Where is he now?"

Miles made a face. "Oh, he's likely already in his lab. He sleeps there with the undead."

"The undead?" Thalanil frowned. This was *not* what he had expected to hear.

"He's trying to figure out how Marikoth made them. If he does that then maybe he can figure out a way to stop more from being made," Miles explained.

"Marikoth makes the undead?" Thalanil blinked.

"Oh, yes! They're falling apart, but they still want to attack and–and bite you. Eat you if they get a chance, I think!" Miles shuddered.

"And your brother is trying to unravel that?"

"Yes, he's crazy about it. He gets crazy about many strange things. The undead smell and…" Miles kept talking but he wasn't listening really.

Now that sounded like a useful thing to do. But surely a human could not understand the intricacies of magic.

But I can.

He stood up abruptly. He was dressed in a pair of simple leggings and a long robe in pale blue. His clothes from yesterday were–were unwearable. He could still smell his father and Shadeheart

upon them. He wouldn't wear them again even if they were cleaned. But with his boots this outfit would be enough to walk the halls of Reave Castle.

"Take me to your brother's lab," he demanded.

Miles blinked and rose less certainly. "But–but you're not dressed! We have to wait for Milius and–"

"I am fine." Thalanil shook his long hair, which seemed to mesmerize Miles. "Besides, you said your brother's lab *smells*. I would not want to wear anything nice there, would I?"

"Oh, no! I see what you mean, but… but you are a *king*. People shouldn't see you in nightclothes," Miles protested softly.

Thalanil threw back his head and laughed. He touched Miles' cheek, which had the young man blushing. "Oh, Miles, here is one fact about true royalty: it is not in our clothes, our crowns or our throne that our right to rule comes from." His heart lurched as he said these things, hoping they were true. "It is in our bones and blood and very spirit. So I could walk naked through the hallways and still be as kingly as I am in my most royal robes."

Miles pinked more but nodded.

"So will you take me to your brother? Then we can meet with Lord Lemos and Milius," Thalanil said.

Miles nodded again. It seemed like he was incapable of speech. But Miles was as good as his unspoken word and took Thalanil down to the lower levels of the castle after Thalanil had found his boots. The people they met on the way did glance at Thalanil a few times, but none veered away or reacted with fear or shock at seeing a full-blooded Fae in their midst. They had been informed of his presence and there was clearly good discipline here. Even the Guard that followed them at a discrete distance did not appear in any way threatening, but more as if they were guarding him from harm. Not that he needed it. Only Marikoth was a threat to him and these Guard would offer no protection against his elder brother at all.

They finally made it to the lab. The smell–of which Miles had spoken with such distaste–was evident halfway down the hall. Miles looked anxiously from him to the door of the laboratory. In addition to the sweet smell of rotting flesh, Thalanil smelled hints of bitter chemicals and dried herbs. There was the faint bubbling of alembics and the flicker of flames. When he stepped into the laboratory he lifted his eyebrows. This was the lab of an alchemist, a potion master, not some human child.

A young man with blonde hair who was hunched over a table did not turn around towards them as he said, "Gods be damned, Miles, I *told* you not to bother me in–"

"I asked him to," Thalanil said.

The blonde man turned around swiftly on his stool. He stared at Thalanil for long moments in silence. He was handsome for a human, with fox-like features and intelligent, if suspicious, eyes. He said nothing as he took in Thalanil and Thalanil took him in.

"Miles tells me that you are trying to understand the potion that brings the dead back to life or unlife." Thalanil's eyes had gone to the two shuffling dead creatures behind the bars. They were the source of the most objectionable smell. "That sounded like a worthy task, which I wished to know more of. Are your conclusions in that notebook you're writing in so assiduously?"

He gestured to the leather bound notebook spread open on the table behind Christopher. Christopher nodded, but moved to almost protectively cover it from prying eyes. He tracked Thalanil as the Fae king slowly moved through his lab, checking out his equipment, the dissected animals, whose skin was peeled and pinned back, and the many colored liquids bubbling away. He stopped by Christopher's side. Christopher gazed up at him. He had not risen from his seat.

He does not give respect easily. One has to earn it from him, Thalanil realized.

"I see the book you are referencing in your work is written in one of the Aeturnal dialects. You have someone who can read it?" Thalanil asked.

Christopher shifted slightly. "No, but there are…" He grimaced and looked ashamed, "*pictures* of herbs and ingredients. I have been cross-referencing those and seeing what words are associated with them."

"That's quite logical." Thalanil nodded. "May I see what you've done so far?"

Christopher still did not move.

"Christopher, that's Finn's father!" Miles hissed. "He's the Fae king–"

"Really, Miles? You think I wouldn't recognize him? There's only one Fae king staying in the castle, after all," Christopher's voice was edged.

Christopher's handsome face this close up showed exhaustion. There were dark circles under his eyes and lines around his mouth. His clothes, while sturdy and of good material, were slightly grimy and rumpled, but he still kept them relatively neat. But it was clear that he had been sleeping in them and had not changed out of them for some time.

"So show him your work! Maybe he can help! He's a mage," Miles pointed out. "And it's his brother who… who… ah, well…"

"Marikoth is the Death Mage who has done all of this. He is my elder brother," Thalanil explained. "I don't understand my brother's magic any better than you do, but I do understand potions and this dialect. I would like to help you, Christopher, not take over and claim the glory of any discovery for myself."

Christopher swallowed then shoved the journal and book towards Thalanil with a sigh of defeat. "Here. Look. I'm stuck. I cannot figure out the last two ingredients."

Thalanil doubted it was only two ingredients that were missing as this boy had no magic and no training, but he said nothing, just took the young man's notebook and reviewed it first. Within moments, he started to realize that he might be wrong about Christopher's abilities. He flipped page after page of the notebook, scanning the contents. He then reached over to the book written in the Aeturnal dialect. He compared the two of them. His lips silently formed the words as he read them.

He stopped and stared ahead at the undead who moaned and reached for the three of them hungrily.

"Well, is Christopher on the right track?" Miles asked. "He's very smart so he probably is, but it's complicated and new–"

"Miles, stop," Christopher hissed, his cheeks heating and fear entering his eyes. He was afraid that all his work had been for naught, that he wasn't smart enough to crack this.

Thalanil read all of this clearly in the young man's shadowed eyes. He then understood why Finrael was taking care of these young men, caring for them, and had forgiven them for their trespasses against him. They were wounded children. They had been harmed as much as Finrael had.

"No, Miles is right. You must be very smart, Christopher. Beyond anything I would have thought such a young human–*any* human–would be. You indeed are two ingredients away from understanding this," Thalanil told him, watching as understanding and a fierce joy filled Christopher's face.

"Do you know what they are?" Christopher asked.

"Yes, I do." Thalanil smiled. "I absolutely know, and those ingredients are a clue to how to unwind this terrible potion."

Christopher quivered practically like a dog about to run after prey. "What are they? How do we do this?"

"I will show you." Thalanil smiled more broadly. "Let us work together."

"Absolutely," Christopher said.

"Now, here is what we need to do."

And the two of them started to plan.

BACK TO LIFE

Rohan awoke to soft licks on his face. At first, he smiled as he thought it was Finn waking him up in a most delightful manner. Though licking was a little odd. Yet if the licking went *lower*… Then he smelled wolf breath and his eyelids shot open. Finn giggled beside him.

The pups were arrayed all around Rohan's head and it was their tongues that had been licking his face. They made soft yips when he sat up and they slid off, tumbling onto the bed in little piles of fluff and flailing paws.

Finn was lying on his side, head propped up on one arm, watching Rohan get molested by adorable pups. Skye was sprawled against Finn's front and one of his lover's arms was curled around her semi-sleeping form–she was watching her pups closely–while his hand was moving lightly in her black fur.

"Good morning," Finn said.

"Morning. Where is the fluffy bast–ah!" Rohan was rocked back onto his pillow again as Tyreon jumped up on top of him and proceeded to lay on his chest. In a strained voice, Rohan said, "Here's the fluffy bastard. I'm surprised we slept with all of them around us."

"It was delightfully warm and they were very quiet. We've been watching you sleep for about an hour," Finn said, his eyes smiling along with his lips.

"You let me sleep while you were awake?" Rohan knew he sounded wounded, but every moment with Finn was one he didn't want to miss.

"I love watching you sleep. Especially when you're peaceful like this morning. It makes me feel that there is nothing wrong with the world," Finn confessed.

Rohan felt warmth bloom in his chest. Making Finn feel safe was the greatest thing in the world. "I'm glad then."

"I ordered us breakfast," Finn added. "So you don't have to wait long to be fed."

"Ah, there's nothing worse than wishing for food." Rohan looked at Tyreon's panting face. The wolf was smiling. "So *that's* why they're still here. Hoping to cadge some bacon and eggs, Tyreon?"

The wolf smiled seemingly broader.

"Cook Shelton and Hannah already fed them," Finn said, but then he looked a little sheepish. "But

they are a growing family so maybe we could share some of our food?"

All of the wolves' tails thumped eagerly as they looked expectantly at Rohan. Surely, he would share. Surely, he wouldn't be so cruel as to turn away such a handsome, hungry family, would he?

"You are putting a lot of power in my hands, Finn." Rohan's lips twitched as a smile threatened to overwhelm him. "To feed the wolves from the table or not to feed them? It would probably set a terrible precedent to do so." The pups whined. Skye and Tyreon's ears drooped. Finn's lower lip wobbled. "But I suppose this *one* time won't hurt."

"Yay!" Finn laughed and a chorus of excited woofs followed.

Rohan lightly grasped Tyreon's furry snout in his hands and said, "Don't make me regret this." He then kissed Tyreon on the nose. He was rewarded with a wolf snort and then a happy lick. "Ugh, enough of that. I don't know where that tongue has been. Or rather, I *do*."

The food was soon delivered and they were eating out on the balcony. The promised eggs and bacon were shared liberally with the wolves that roamed between their legs searching for "accidentally" dropped morsels. Strangely, the wolves were mostly clustered around Rohan. Or maybe it wasn't strange as he kept offering them bacon. Finn caught him doing so and just laughed.

"It's just the one time! I'm not setting a precedent!" Rohan told him boldly.

"Uh huh, of course not. They've already got you wound around their little paws, you know that, don't you?" Finn laughed.

"I am in control," Rohan insisted.

Tyreon laid his head on Rohan's lap and looked up at him lovingly.

Maybe one more piece of bacon won't hurt.

In between feeding the wolves and themselves, he and Finn had been trying to plan their day.

"You must meet Queen Artremaya," Rohan said. "I expect the King of Bolan will also be here soon, perhaps even this evening."

Finn nodded. "What are we going to tell them exactly? Your uncle brought them here as some kind of war council against my father. But he has nothing to do with any of our problems. At least, not immediately. Not to mention he's actually here."

Rohan nodded. "We are not alone in seeing the land die. Queen Artremaya intimated that she, too, is experiencing something strange as far away as her shores."

"Could the Dreadbrood's influence be spreading so far?" Finn asked. "Again, I think not."

"I agree. Reason and instincts are fighting against such an assumption. It really does appear as if the fracturing of the Empire might have had more consequences than anticipated," Rohan said.

"Sultane was once part of the Empire too?"

"Oh, yes, Bolan as well. Only Achuvia was independent," Rohan answered.

"So if the prophecy is right, then not only will Rirea and the Empire have to merge, but also Sultane and Bolan, too?" Finn's eyebrows lifted. They had talked briefly about this the night before.

"And they would have to agree to us ruling them." Rohan let out a disbelieving laugh even as he

said this. “Saying it out loud makes it sound ever more unbelievable.”

“I cannot see how they would come to such an agreement. It was impossible enough when it was just my father, but–”

“I know.” Rohan scrubbed his face with his hands. Tyreon pressed his furry body tight against his right leg and whined softly. Rohan reached down and petted him, calming them both. “I have no idea how to even suggest such a thing without Queen Artremaya drawing her sword right then and there. She came here looking for answers and an alliance against a common enemy. That’s not exactly what we have to offer her.”

“Well, we do. Marikoth,” Finn suggested. “He is a big enough problem all on his own, regardless if we do anything at all about the old Empire.”

“He won’t stay behind the Wall. He told us himself that he believes a restored Empire is necessary to stop the curse or whatever is wrong here,” Rohan sighed.

“And he needs you by his side for that,” Finn reminded him softly.

“I have my own beloved Death Mage, thank you. I do not need another.” He reached across to squeeze Finn’s hand.

Finn said nothing, staring down at his plate, thinking dark thoughts. Rohan knew Finn had to be thinking of his fear that he wasn’t a Death Mage and wasn’t meant for Rohan. But prophecies be damned. Finn was his match in every way.

“I still can’t believe we saw the Dreadbrood. Could it have been just a–a shared imagining?” Rohan asked, knowing he sounded ridiculously hopeful.

“You know it is not.” Finn grimaced. “They are here for a reason. Maybe that reason is to go up against Marikoth.” Finn’s head lowered more. “I am Death’s Chosen after all. The Dreadbrood is supposed to be controlled by… me.”

Out of the corner of his eyes, Rohan thought he caught the flutter of a raven's wings. His head shot towards the movement, but there was nothing but clear sky. But Finn was also looking in the same direction. He did not think the wings were an illusion.

“We should go through what we know,” Rohan said. “And what we guess.”

“And what we fear?” Finn gave him an uncertain look.

“Yes, especially that.”

Finn absently scratched between Skye’s ears. His expression was distant. His lips nervously rolling over one another. “I asked Tearlach to read that book your uncle found and tell me what’s in it.”

“You think he will give you an unbiased interpretation of it?”

Finn nodded after a moment. “He doesn’t believe in the Dreadbrood.”

“Or so he claims.”

“Do you think he’s lying?” Finn studied his face.

“No, no, I don’t. While he may have been ingesting poison since he was a lad to avoid being

assasinated, he actually seems relatively straightforward in his own dealings with us, at least," Rohan admitted.

"When we first looked at the engraving on the ceiling in the tomb, it seemed so very clear that an Aeturnal and his Bonded One had fought them and won. But now? The Aeturnals built a whole structure deep beneath the earth to house the Dreadbrood," Finn said.

"Perhaps they could not be destroyed," Rohan offered, though that was terrifying in and of itself.

"Why not march them into the sea and have them lost beneath hundreds of feet of water?" Finn asked. "Why keep them near enough that they could be reached?"

That was the question.

"What I find interesting is that while there has been plenty said about Death Mages going mad and their power poisoning them, there is nothing similarly said about the Aeturnal's Bonded One," Rohan pointed out. "In every sculpture, painting and engraving we've seen, the Bonded One is *nothing* like Marikoth."

"What do you mean?" Finn looked up at him hopefully.

"Death's Chosen is *supposed* to use Death Magic. It is his natural recourse; therefore there is no harm to him from it. Contrast that with the Death Mage where it is an ever-growing curse," Rohan said.

"Are you suggesting that the Bonded One is not a Death Mage, but Death's Chosen? How can that be?" Finn asked.

"Life and death. Balanced." Rohan frowned. "I don't know. But whatever Marikoth happens to be, he is not what is represented in the tomb. Can we agree on that?"

"I want to believe it. So very much."

"There is no world where I love Marikoth instead of you. There is no fate that could change that," Rohan said simply. "I have never felt so sure of anything in my life."

Finn's smile was like the rising of the sun. "You believe that?"

"Yes, without doubt, Finn."

"Then if I *am* the Death's Chosen… perhaps we should find a way to access and control the Dreadbrood in our fight against Marikoth," Finn suggested.

Rohan let out a breath between his teeth. "To have access to such a fearsome army…"

"Yes, it would perhaps be the only army that could be used against a Death Mage." Finn licked his lips. "It could give us the edge we need."

"It could and… it should." Rohan focused on him. "You are *good*, Finn. One of the kindest, best people I know. If anyone could be trusted to wield such a powerful army, it would be you."

"And if I really could wield it, and we defeated Marikoth, do you think," Finn's eyes slowly lifted to his, "that Bolan and Sultane would dare refuse our request that their lands be restored to the Empire?"

Silence fell.

Rohan saw how it could be then. If such an army of undead monsters was controlled by Finn, no one would dare stand before the young man. Sultane, Bolan, and who knew what other places would fall. Could this be fate? It brought him no joy to think of it, but puzzle pieces were clicking into place as if greater powers were setting the table.

"I know that it feels like we should be struck down for just suggesting it, but… but it could work, couldn't it?" Finn pressed.

"Yes, Finn. You have a strategic mind. And you understand people. It would be a way to reunite the Empire whether the other rulers would be willing to or not," Rohan agreed.

"It's hard to think of oneself as being on the side of good planning like that."

"If this were for ourselves, you would be right. But it is not. We have seen the fate of the rest of the kingdoms if this is not fixed. What would we be willing to do to save people?" Rohan wondered, but he was leery of this path. "I have never seen myself as a conqueror king. Far from it, as you know."

"You'd rather people agreed on the best course. And I would too. Even if we wouldn't use it against them, the Dreadbrood would make people think… twice about ignoring our pleas," Finn carefully said.

And Marikoth thought him too soft. He doesn't understand Finn at all.

"If there is no other choice… But we are far from any of this. We don't even know if we can get to the Dreadbrood, let alone wake them and command them," Rohan pointed out.

Finn nodded. "But we should try."

"Yes, we should try."

Their discussion was tabled as Serxio and Leonid arrived. They urged the two men to sit with them and partake in the food and drink.

"I must see my father as soon as possible," Finn said, looking concerned. "I felt guilty leaving him at all last night. I hope he's still resting in bed–"

"Oh, no, he's not!" Serxio responded blithely as he munched on a buttered croissant. One of the pups was dancing around his feet. He let it lick butter from his fingers.

"What do you mean, Serxio?" Finn stared at the foppish young lord. "Where is he?"

"He hasn't done something foolish, has he?" Rohan asked, adding silently, *Such as attempting to return to the Empire to face Marikoth alone?*

"He and Christopher are looking for corpses," Serxio answered. When everyone stared at him, he added, "To experiment on." The stares did not stop with that explanation. "Evidently, they've figured out what's in the potion used to reanimate the dead, or think they have in any case. They want to try it on a corpse. They were asking me where to find a dead body. But while I could easily find them a living young lady, the dead are out of my bailiwick, I'm afraid."

"Talk about burying the lede!" Leonid growled. "By the gods, man, do you realize that every single sentence you just said was highly alarming? Even the last one! But, at least, the last one

explained things."

"How did you find this all out, Serxio?" Finn asked.

"Well, I always bring Christopher a breakfast sandwich, not to mention lunch and dinner, as he would never eat if I didn't make sure it was right in front of his nose and then stood there and watched him consume it," Serxio said.

Rohan laughed. "You are a truly goodhearted man, Serxio."

"Christopher really doesn't take care of himself," Serxio sighed. "He's so intent on proving he's worthy. In any case, I went down there this morning to feed him and that's when I found him and King Thalanil. Thick as thieves. Heads down as they both looked at foul things. Poor Miles was desperately holding his nose in the farthest corner of the room, but he wouldn't leave Thalanil until I told him he needed to get Milius and bring him down to the lab. It was clear that King Thalanil had no intention of leaving and he was still wearing his nightclothes. We can't have people thinking he's not being taken care of!"

"Miles? The tailor? All of them down in the lab with Christopher and Thalanil?" Rohan's eyebrows lifted.

"You should have seen Milius trying to measure Thalanil's inseam while he was taking samples of the undead," Serxio mused. "What we do for fashion!"

"I can only imagine." Finn shook his head. "How did my father seem? Other than his search for– for corpses?"

"Focused. He and Christopher are rather two peas in a pod," Serxio said.

"Oh." Finn lowered his head.

Rohan frowned. "What is it, Finn?"

"It's just foolishness." Finn shook his head and tried to smile, but it didn't quite reach his eyes. "Father would never discuss Death Magic with me, but here he is working on raising the dead with Christopher."

Rohan reached over and clasped his shoulder. "Your father thought he was protecting you when he did that. Now he knows that the only way to defeat Marikoth is to learn everything he can about those powers."

"You're afraid that he likes Christopher more than you. That's impossible," Leonid said and shook his head. "Finn, that man loves you more than life. I could see it when he threw us out of the Empire, head over heels."

Finn genuinely smiled. "Thank you both. I know he cares for me. It's foolishness as I said. And I'm glad he likes Christopher and Miles. Truly."

Rohan knew why this was more sensitive for Finn. His awful stepfather had seemingly preferred his stepbrothers to him. To have his father do so as well would confirm Finn's worst fears that there was something wrong with him, something unlovable. It was madness, but Finn clearly feared it.

"Where have they gone to look for corpses?" Finn asked. "I can't imagine that they'd convince

someone to let them experiment on a loved one."

"Convicts," Rohan said grimly.

"Executed convicts?" Finn's right hand lifted to his throat as he likely imagined one killed just for the purpose of experimentation. The very thought made Rohan ill as well. But at least these prisoners' deaths would be useful rather than just punitive.

"We might not have to bring up an execution date, my king, to get them a fresh corpse," Leonid said.

"Why not, Leonid?" Rohan asked.

"As it so happens, I have one already."

"Now you're burying the lede unless you've become a grave robber recently and I don't know about it. But I know everything about you, including the fact that you haven't changed your socks for way too long," Serxio complained.

"Shows how much you know! I'm not wearing any socks. But, in any case, one of the convicts died last night. I was going to have him buried in pauper's field this morning. He was knifed by a fellow inmate," Leonid said. "A real bastard. Child killer. So there's no loved one coming to bury him or care if he walks around again. For a little while anyways. Shall I arrange for Christopher and Thalanil to receive his corpse instead?"

"I would have never thought to be a part of raising the dead, but yes, Leonid, arrange to have the body delivered to the laboratory and, obviously, let Thalanil and Christopher know to expect it," Rohan answered.

"Let me just step out a moment, my king, and I shall have it sorted with the other Guards," Leonid said, as he got up from his place at the table and disappeared inside.

"I would like to witness their experiment," Finn said.

"We should all see it," Rohan said.

Leonid soon returned. "All is arranged, my king. They should be delivering the corpse shortly."

"Ryleth would surely like to be present as well," Finn said.

"Actually, I have news about her," Leonid said.

"Were you bringing her a breakfast sandwich, Leonid, when you discovered her plans?" Rohan knew his lips were twitching suspiciously.

"Ah, no, my king. She was actually heading down into the crypt when I saw her early this morning. She wanted to start work on the translation of the library. She and Head Librarian Crosley had breakfast together. He was all atwitter to speak to a real, live Fae priestess," Leonid explained.

"I should show Father the tomb as well. It might," Finn paused, "*explain* things to him if he were to see the sculptures on the ceiling."

"It might at that," Rohan said, not truly having any hope of it. "Well, if everyone is fed, we should head down to the laboratory."

"They should be delivering the corpse about now," Leonid said and wiped his lips with a napkin

before tossing it down.

His Guard captain had finished his own eggs rather than feeding it to the wolves. Rohan had slipped his plate to the floor for the wolves to lick clean.

"They are going to get fat and lazy if you keep feeding them, my king," Leonid chuckled.

Rohan blushed. "Not in the least. It's one time."

"Right. Of course, it is." Leonid shook his head.

The four of them–the wolves went back to burrowing into the covers on the bed–went down to the laboratory. As they were about to descend the final set of stairs to the lower level they met Queen Artremaya. She was dressed all in silver, including the beads she had added to her braids.

Rohan felt a stab of guilt go through him as he remembered Finn and his earlier conversation. While it was one thing for him to be prepared to cede Rirea to the Empire as she was all but dead, Sultane might be suffering only the beginnings of the blight, but he doubted it was bad enough that Artremaya would consider abdicating.

Unless a dead army is at her border. He grimaced. *Let it not come to that.*

"Well, this looks like quite the party!" She smiled welcomingly at them all, but her eyes stayed on Finn.

"Queen Artremaya, please let me introduce you to Prince Finrael Ravenspar, Crown Prince of the Empire of the Eclipse Throne," Rohan said as he gestured to Finn.

"Queen Artremaya, I am so pleased to meet you officially," Finn said with an incline of his head. "I did not get a chance to thank you properly yesterday for being willing to defend Reave Castle and help with my father."

She smiled winsomely. "Well met, Prince Ravenspar. I admit I have never met a Fae prince before, or a Fae king. And the wyvern was exciting, too."

"Silver Soul is a sight. But I don't know that I am so much a prince anymore if I ever was," Finn told her softly.

"Your father's arrival here was not a happy one, I take it?" she stated more than asked.

Finn looked at Rohan to see if he should say more to her. Rohan inclined his head, indicating that Finn should go on. If they were to gain her allyship, at least in the fight against Marikoth, she needed to know what they were dealing with. Best to start now with the truth so she wouldn't expect lies later.

"You were brought here believing that the enemy was my father, but that is not the case. My uncle, Marikoth, is the true enemy of all of us. He has taken the Empire, killed my grandfather, and would have killed my father," Finn explained. He swallowed and his hands clenched his fists. It always amazed Rohan how very fierce and dangerous Finn could be, especially since he was exceedingly gentle most of the time. "He is something called a Death Mage with great powers he feeds by draining the life of all living creatures. And he can also bring the dead to fight for him. We are about to see how that is done. Downstairs."

Realizing that seeing was better than simply telling, Rohan offered, "Would you like to see?"

"See you raise the dead? Ah, this is a unique offer. I will take it," Artremaya said with a nod. "This trip has turned into quite the wonder."

She followed along with them. None of them spoke. He could see plenty of questions in her intelligent eyes. The smell of the old dead and the recently deceased perfumed the hallway to the laboratory. Finn's nose wrinkled. Rohan put a protective arm around his shoulders. They stepped inside.

One of the long tables had been cleared of alembics and a corpse–relatively fresh–of a man in his fifties lay there. He was a big man with abnormally large hands. Rohan remembered something vaguely about a murderer who had killed his child victims by strangling them. This must be him. Any pity or discomfort he felt for this man's corpse being used in an experiment was suddenly quite gone. Christopher and Thalanil were both watching an alembic of dark green liquid bubbling thickly.

"Add the thistlewort now," Thalanil instructed Christopher.

"What if we have the proportions wrong?" Christopher asked, but he threw the thorny, black herb into the liquid without delay.

"The potion simply won't work," Thalanil answered.

"The last one exploded. I thought Miles might have a heart attack," Christopher said mildly.

Miles, who was in the far corner, called out, "You should have warned me!"

"Ah, the laboratory is never a quiet place, Miles," Thalanil answered with a warmth that surprised Rohan. In fact, the Fae king seemed quite comfortable with both human boys.

Rohan glanced down at Finn. His lover's face held a neutral expression. He guessed Finn was telling himself that he was *glad* that Thalanil was getting along with his stepbrothers.

"Perhaps I should be upstairs with Milius, helping with your clothes, King Thalanil," Miles suggested piteously.

"I would have you see your brother's triumph," Thalanil said. "Clothes later."

Miles' shoulders sank as all the hope of avoiding this malodorous place left him. "Yes, I suppose you're right."

"It does not appear we will have another explosion this morning. I believe we've got it," Thalanil said as the potion went from green to inky black.

"I can't believe it!" Christopher looked quite stunned. "It worked!"

"We won't know that until we see if that corpse walks," Thalanil cautioned. "But it does resemble what the book says it should."

He quickly checked the book that Rohan had found at Marikoth's campsite in the woods. It was only then that they realized they had visitors.

"Finn! King Rohan! Serxio and Leonid, you've come to see," Christopher said, eyes burning with an almost feverish brightness.

"We have, Christopher. You've worked so hard for this," Rohan said.

"Without King Thalanil I should not have reached this point," Christopher said, coloring slightly.

"You would have. You were almost there. I just sped things up," Thalanil said. Though he spoke warmly of Christopher's achievement, his eyes were on the arm that Rohan had around Finn's waist. He reached for his son. "Finrael, I have missed you, my son. Come to me."

Finn hesitated a moment. He smiled at Rohan. His eyes were full of apologies. Rohan smiled back and graciously urged Finn towards his father.

At least he hasn't put a dagger against my throat or sent me spinning hundreds of miles away. That's an improvement.

Finn embraced Thalanil. The Fae king wrapped his arms around Finn and held him tightly. His eyes closed as he simply relished having Finn near him and safe. Rohan knew that they had that desire in common. To keep Finn safe. They could build on that. He hoped.

"Please let me also introduce Queen Artremaya, Father," Finn said as he broke the hug.

"You must rule Sultane," Thalanil said after a moment's consideration of her.

Her eyebrows lifted. "You are correct. You recognize my name?"

"No," Thalanil answered. "But you are the spitting image of Queen Redanya."

Artremaya's eyes widened. "She was my great, great, well, many great grandmother."

"We met once in her garden at Thespain," Thalanil explained.

Artremaya slowly shook her head. "We hear of the immortality of Fae, but I do not think we truly understand it."

"She must have made quite the impression on you to recall her after so long," Rohan said.

"It was not that long ago for a Fae. She was one of the *few* wise and just human rulers. A very few," Thalanil answered coolly. "She made our determination to cede some of the old Empire to humanity seem wise."

And I might be asking–or demanding–it back. The irony runs deep.

"That is quite high praise. She brought about a great time of peace and prosperity for Sultane. May her light always shine." Artremaya made a strange symbol in the air.

"I take it that the light is not shining as bright in Sultane now?" Thalanil asked.

"Like Rirea, we are seeing far more death and decay than we should. While not yet anywhere near as severe as here, the signs are all there that we are headed for a steep decline. We came here to find a solution for what appears to be a joint problem," she said.

"I am certain you thought I and the Wall were your problem?" Thalanil asked.

Finn stiffened and quickly said, "I explained to her that it is Marikoth–"

"Yes, my Finrael, I am certain that you defended me well." Thalanil kissed Finn's temple. "But to most humans, one Fae is the same as another."

"Just as one human is seen the same as another?" Rohan gave him a hard look.

Was Thalanil not looking upon him with suspicion because of his parents? Or maybe it was his Aeturnal blood that was doing it.

Thalanil finally inclined his head before saying, "I do not know the cause of your lands' decline, Queen Artremaya. Marikoth may be behind that. He may not. But you–*we*–have a new problem," Thalanil continued. "My brother has *taken* the throne from me and I have no doubt that he wishes to take back all the land that the Empire gave you. Even as children, he spoke of a restored Empire."

"I see," she said, her eyes narrowing.

"I do not know how quickly he will move. He has lived among you mortals for some time. He may have adopted your ways and may move swiftly," Thalanil said.

"His hunger will force him to do it," Finn said, his eyes going distant as if he were seeing something of what he spoke. "While the overgrowth satisfies me, he needs to drain people. He *wants* to drain them. If he kills too many of the Fae, he'll have a revolt on his hands so he'll go after–"

"Humans?" Artremaya guessed.

Finn nodded stiffly. "In the end, it will never be enough and he'll destroy everyone and himself."

Silence fell.

Finally, Artremaya stirred herself and said, "And he will use the dead to do it?"

She gestured to the convict's corpse.

"He doesn't really need anyone to help him. He drains his opponents and uses their own life force to power himself," Finn answered. He stepped over to the corpse. "But I think he will use the dead too as a distraction."

"Perhaps we can take that toy away from him," Christopher said and held up the alembic. "Do you want to do the honors, King Thalanil?"

"No, they are all yours," Thalanil said. "Put two drops between his lips. That should be more than enough."

Everyone crowded around the table. Even Miles crept over, practically hiding behind Serxio. Christopher stood just above the corpse's head. He slowly tilted the alembic over and let two drops of the thick, black liquid drop between the corpse's pallid lips. For long moments, nothing happened.

Christopher's shoulders sank. "Perhaps we got it wrong–"

But then the corpse's eyes opened and it began to moan.

"You did it, Christopher," Finn whispered. "You've brought the dead back to life."

LIFE AND DEATH

"Now that you've brought the evil convict back to life can you kill him again?" Serxio asked as they all watched the convict sit up on the table and stare blankly ahead.

"It's amazing! And terrifying!" Artremaya whispered. "The dead are alive once more!"

Finn looked deeply into the convict's milky white eyes. The cataracts of death were still there. He wasn't actually alive like they were alive. He was animated. Finn could almost feel the strings that operated the convict and connected him strongly to his father and less strongly to Christopher. Finn hadn't been able to see those connections in the undead that Marikoth had made that he'd fought in the catacombs. Perhaps because he hadn't been there at their making. Or the physical distance had rendered those connections so thin and frail between the undead and Marikoth that he hadn't noticed them. But they were certainly there now.

Finn looked more closely at where the strands of life connected to the undead. He let his senses flow outwards to fully encompass the corpse and that was when he fully understood it. The little specks of light he had seen in the corpses when he'd first encountered them were the anchor points that kept the corpse "alive". The same strands of life that he saw when he looked at a living person connected the creator and undead. But there were far fewer necessary to motivate the undead. A dozen overall as opposed to countless. There was no life in the corpse. All life came from the *creator*. That was why he hadn't been able to drain them. There was no life to take.

This led to another revelation. Just like he had been able to control the Ostil at the village, that was how the undead were being controlled by its creator, but at a much lesser level. And, more than that, he could take those strands into his own hands, just like he did with the living, and cut off his father and Christopher's control of the undead. But that would require him to take over the life-load to fuel it as well or he could simply let the creature "die" again.

But what if I could use Christopher and Father's lives to fuel an army of the undead? Tie the living and the dead together against their will?

Finn shook himself. The very idea of doing that was horrific, but it was something that Marikoth would think of and *do*.

"Why isn't it attacking us? Or has it just not awakened enough to get on with that already?" Leonid

asked, fingering the hilt of his sword.

"We control it," Thalanil explained. "Unless Christopher or I will it to attack you, it will not."

"So, Christopher, we've always been good friends." Serxio put an arm around Christopher's shoulders. "You wouldn't let that foul thing touch me, would you?"

"Don't worry. I wouldn't sic him on you. Who would bring me food if I were to have you killed, Serxio?" Christopher asked with a small smile.

"Exactly! Wait! That doesn't sound right." Serxio blinked rapidly.

"Oh, my goodness, Christopher made a funny," Leonid chuckled. "But, then again, it was at Serxio's expense so that's too easy."

"Keep snickering, Leonid," Serxio sniffed and crossed his arms over his chest. "I won't be bringing you your beer when you're on rounds."

Leonid's mouth opened and shut. "But–I–you–oh, c'mon now, Serxio!"

Finn grinned. He caught Rohan's mouth also suspiciously twitching as he tried to hide his amusement at their bickering. It was their favorite pastime to watch these two go at it. Even Artremaya appeared amused when she could drag her gaze away from the undead convict.

"You need to make it up to me." Another sniff from Serxio.

"You know you're my best friend, right?" Leonid jostled Serxio's shoulder and gave him a look that was suspiciously similar to the ones that Tyreon had given Rohan to get the Rirean king to hand over more bacon.

Serxio looked slightly mollified. "You will have to prove it to me."

"But I just–all right! All right! What do you want?" Leonid asked.

The two of them stepped back to continue their bickering. Finn guessed that Leonid would be paying for his "funny" for a while. Serxio looked like a cat about to get fed a whole lot of cream.

"How do I control him, King Thalanil? I have no magic," Christopher pointed out.

The connection of your life to the corpse does that. But you can't feel that, Christopher, Finn thought.

"Both our blood was necessary for the potion. That created a bond of sorts. Yours is not as strong as mine is with the undead, because of your lack of magic, but it's most certainly there," Thalanil said, which was true. His father's ability to manipulate magic gave his life force more power than Christopher's. There were more connections between Thalanil and the undead. "You only need to speak your intention to the creature and focus all your thoughts upon it for it to work."

This last part, too, made sense as to why Thalanil had greater control. Magic was will made real, and his father had plenty of experience doing that, while Christopher did not. But Christopher was quite willful naturally. While his will didn't fuel spells, his determination and focus were legendary.

Christopher stood in front of the creature and said, "Stand." The creature shifted but remained sitting. Christopher's brows drew together as he said with more command, "*Stand.*" There was a flare of light along the strands that connected Christopher and the undead. The creature got to its feet.

Christopher let out a bark of laughter. He turned and looked at Finn. "Did you see? I–I did that! I did it!"

"You did, Christopher," Finn said with a smile.

"So could anyone whose blood is mixed with the potion do this?" Artremaya asked.

"Yes," Thalanil said. "But more human blood would be necessary to extend the potion's strength than a magical being's blood."

The silver, waving threads called to Finn. He imagined attaching a few undead to the living. One person could fuel many undead without much discomfort. A whole army could be fueled that way…

The greatest army, the raven said. *My army.*

Finn saw the bird out of the corner of his eye. It was perched on the gate to the crypt. No one else, of course, saw it.

You've made yourself scarce, Finn said to it. *Ever since I found the Dreadbrood here. In Rirea. Underneath Rirea. You've stayed away. Not wanting to answer questions, right? Not wanting to tell me what you've been hiding all along?*

You sound betrayed. But you never asked me where the Dreadbrood was, so I have told you no lies, the raven said.

You are well aware that silence is an answer, too.

Too clever by half, my Chosen, the raven cawed. *There are many things I know that you do not but may wish to. Does the fact that I do not vomit all of those out mean I am lying to you? Or is it you who have been foolish not to ask me?*

The raven had a point.

I think of you as "the raven" but you're not. You're the God of Death, aren't you? Finn asked, confirming what he'd said before. It felt more concrete now to say it. It felt more portentous.

The raven's eyes burned blue-white. *Yes, my Chosen. You name me well.*

I cannot imagine that a god would tell me everything it knows even if I asked you, Finn pointed out.

You are correct. For there are things I know that would destroy you to even hear them. The God of Death cleaned its feathers.

All right. Fair enough. I have some questions for you. Pertinent questions.

Ask them, the God of Death said. *All that could happen is that I do not answer.*

Is the Dreadbrood mine to command against Marikoth? Finn asked. Wasn't that the question he needed answered? Yes, it was. And then he imagined using the knowledge he had just learned about fueling the undead to the Dreadbrood. *A much smaller living army fueling a massive and terrifying undead one.*

The raven cocked its head at him. *The Dreadbrood is my army.*

But it's here for a reason. I'm here for a reason, Finn said. *Don't you want me to use it?*

I thought you only wanted to be a Death Mage, the God of Death said coyly.

Only because Rohan is destined to be with a Death Mage! Finn cried.

You would throw away the power of being my Chosen for him? The God of Death asked.

You know what he means to me! He is everything! Finn glared at it.

Accept who you truly are and perhaps I will consider letting you have your pretty king and my army too, the God of Death hissed.

"Finn?" Rohan touched his shoulder.

Finn started and focused on Rohan. When he looked back at the crypt door, the raven was gone.

"I'm sorry," Finn breathed, tension bleeding from him at the raven's absence.

"Are you all right?" Rohan asked.

He caught sight of his father looking over at him and nodded, not explaining further, though he wasn't sure he actually was all right. But he smiled up at Rohan. Because Rohan was all that was right with the world.

"I don't know why you care about dead people doing what you say so much. Most people do what you say, Christopher," Miles muttered as he regarded Christopher's continuing joy with the undead he'd made.

"I've made this, Miles! Well, *we* made it." A quick glance at Thalanil. "And it does what I say because of that. Not because of money or a family name or anything, but the sheer will of creation!" Christopher's eyes glowed. "And it's just the start."

"Hopefully, finding the *end* of this creature will be the next project you take on," Rohan said dryly. "Now that you know how to make them, do you have any idea how to uncreate them? Or stop them from being made?"

I can undo what's been created here in an instant, Finn realized, but kept silent. *Could Marikoth do the same? Perhaps only if he could see where the pinpoints of light in the undead were linked to.*

"Christopher had already done most of the heavy lifting by the time I entered the equation. Plus, reverse-engineering how this potion was created is much easier than creating one that undoes it," Thalanil explained. He picked up the book that had been found in Marikoth's campsite. As he paged through it, he said, "I will have to study this to see if there are any answers. But like most alchemical books, it tells you how to do a thing, not to prevent it. And," Here Thalanil paused and frowned, "there is something missing here. Something I don't understand."

Finn felt something inside of him respond to the book. He could see silver strands waving from it as well. The desire to take hold of them and *pull* was almost irresistible.

Accept who you truly are…

Accept who you truly are…

Accept who you truly are… and perhaps I will consider letting you have your pretty king and my army too.

"I think I do," Finn said, surprised by the words that left his mouth. Showing what he could do

was that first step of acceptance. The others would simply assume it was his powers as a Death Mage and not something else. But he would know. "Would you let me take control of the creature from you?"

"How do we do that? Tell it to obey you?" Christopher asked.

Thalanil's red eyes studied him. "I do not think we have to do anything, Christopher. I believe my son is being polite by asking. I do not think he needs our assistance."

Rohan lifted an eyebrow. "What do you mean by that?"

Accept who you truly are and perhaps I will consider letting you have your pretty king and my army too.

Fine. FINE!

"Has it gotten colder in here?" Miles wrapped his arms around himself.

In the corner of his eye, Finn saw the throne that had appeared to him after confronting his stepfather. It was his. It was waiting for him. Doing this would take him one step closer to taking that seat. His father's gaze slid to where the throne was. He narrowed his eyes as if he could see something, but wasn't sure what it was. Artremaya, who was standing nearer it, shivered like Miles did and shifted away. Rohan looked at him. There were shadows in the Rirean king's eyes as if he understood the conflict that Finn was working through.

Finn moved towards the undead convict. Not that he needed physical closeness, but he found he liked being near the strands of silver.

"I can see how it's made." Finn looked up and saw the strands of light from all of them. "Your lives fuel it. That's why you can control it. If I cut those strands, I can take control from you."

And with a graceful, single movement, he sliced those strands from them. His father grimaced, feeling it. Christopher frowned. He didn't feel it as keenly, but he had a sense something had been lost. The strands were already shriveling. Unless he attached them to himself, the undead wouldn't last long. Finn attached them to himself. There was the faintest pull that let him know it was drawing upon his life force. The milky white eyes focused on him, far more alert than they had been when controlled by his father and Christopher.

Because I am Death's Chosen and I know death and life as no one else can.

"It seems quite different now that you have control of it, Finn," Rohan remarked.

"I can see the connections between me and it," Finn explained, and he swore he felt the bottom of the throne pressed against his right heel. So close now. "I can have more fine control. For example, I don't know if he was a dancer in life, but…"

Finn had the undead start to do a jig. Leonid let out a gasp of laughter.

"Quite good footwork, Finn," Leonid said.

Finn made the creature squat down and begin to do a traditional northern dance, which involved kicking out one leg then the other. Christopher blinked. His father's lips pressed together. Thalanil must be able to feel that Finn's magic came from a different place, or at least, that was what Finn

guessed.

Rohan shook his head and said, "Good lord, Finn, you have more control than Marikoth did."

Finn made the undead stop dancing and simply stand in place.

"He likely wasn't actively controlling them. My guess is that he gave them a series of commands. Something like: if you see a live person, other than me, attack them. Go down this hallway until you reach this location. Things like that," Finn surmised.

I doubt the Dreadbrood are so simple. I bet they can act independently to gain their master's goal.

"I assume people need to be *dead* already to be turned into this–this creature?" Artremaya asked.

"Anyone would be dead after drinking the potion," Christopher said with a shrug. "It's highly toxic. So it could do double duty. Kill and then revive the person."

"You do not need the potion to control the undead. Would you need it to create them, my son?" Thalanil asked.

Finn frowned. "I'm not sure. I don't understand what the potion adds."

Artremaya's eyes narrowed. "Your son is special in some way?"

"My son is–"

"I use Death Magic. That is my power source," Finn cut his father off. "Marikoth does as well, but it is unnatural for him."

"But not for you?" Artremaya asked.

"No, not for me," Finn said and he swore the throne became almost visible to everyone.

Rohan touched his shoulder. Anchoring him. Reminding him that he was good and the choices he made were the things that counted about him.

"Marikoth needed it and he's a Death Mage, but you don't?" his father pushed.

Accept who you truly are…

"No, I don't think I do. Now that I've seen the connection, I understand how to make the undead *live* without that," Finn admitted. "And I have control of them, because I can control the life that fuels them."

His father studied him for longer than was comfortable. Did his father guess the reason that Finn was saying these things, making these distinctions between himself and Marikoth? Maybe his father knew about the Dreadbrood and the Death's Chosen.

"Let me give control back to you," Finn said.

"Give it to Christopher. He's earned it," his father suggested.

Christopher beamed. Finn reattached the undead to Christopher's life force alone.

"Who knew that to make you smile all one had to do was give you control of a corpse," Serxio teased.

Christopher's smile did not even dim one iota at the gentle joke at his expense. "It'll be worth it when we have a way to counteract the potion." Finn saw the strand glow as Christopher commanded

the undead to sit on a chair where he could easily take specimens. “Finn, what about the others? Could you make it so I can control them too?”

“Let me see,” Finn said as he let his eyes go unfocused to see the anchor points. The strands were there. Instead of silver they were faintly green. He wondered if Marikoth would feel him unconnecting these creatures from him. If he did, he likely would think they “died” for a second time. So he snipped the connection and reconnected the strands to Christopher. “How do you feel? Not drained in any way?”

Christopher considered this. “No, not really.”

“If it becomes a problem, please let me know. They’re connected to your life force, Christopher. They live because you live and are connected to them.”

Christopher nodded. “I promise I’ll say something if I feel unwell. But now that I control them all it will be less dangerous to work with them.”

The undead behind the bars, who had been constantly shuffling and moaning, not to mention stretching their hands through the bars when anyone got too close, were now still and silent. They stared straight ahead, completely inactive. Now that Finn was not actively controlling the undead, the throne that had appeared in the corner of his vision had disappeared, too. Finn let out a breath of relief.

“Good,” Finn said. “But alert me immediately if that changes–”

“I know, Finn. I won’t overextend myself,” Christopher promised.

But Finn knew that what Christopher considered overextending himself and what really was overextending himself were two different things. Finn would keep an eye on things. He would also have Serxio and Leonid be his eyes and ears when he wasn’t with Christopher.

His father surprised him by looping an arm through his. Under his father’s other arm, Thalanil tucked Marikoth’s book. Or perhaps it wasn’t Marikoth’s book at all, but from the looks of it, one that had been taken out of the tomb below.

“Finrael, I would like to spend some time with you.” When Thalanil saw Rohan opening his lips to offer to join them, he swiftly added, “*Alone*.”

Finn frowned at his continued rude treatment of Rohan. “Father, I truly think that it would be better for Rohan to accompany us–”

“It’s all right, Finn. Spend time with your father. Queen Artremaya and I should speak. Show him the tomb,” Rohan suggested lightly, but it was a very good one. The tomb showed so much about the Aeturnals and Death Mages.

And the Dreadbrood. Perhaps I should be honest with Father about what I’m experiencing. He might have learned something from my grandfather and he might have ideas of his own.

But it was hard to admit yet another dark thing about himself. Yet it had to be done sometime. And Tearlach would soon come to him with a translation of that book. Better to hear what it was with others who cared for him and had a greater understanding of magic.

“Yes, that’s an excellent idea, Rohan,” Finn answered.

“All of us can meet for lunch. Do not worry, Christopher,” Rohan amended, “I know you will be down here.”

“And I will come back to assist further, Christopher, once I have a chance to peruse this further,” Thalanil said of the book under his arm.

“Of course, I look forward to that, King Thalanil,” Christopher said with surprising warmth.

“Do not forget your fitting later today with Milius, King Thalanil,” Miles reminded eagerly.

“Why don’t you check how he is getting on, Miles,” Thalanil said gently. “You’ll make sure everything is perfect.”

Miles perked up at that. “Oh, I will! I promise! You will get the best!”

Finn found himself smiling genuinely and some of the tension left him. “Come, Father, I have much to show you.”

THE PAST AND THE PRESENT

Finn led his father to the stairs of the crypt. Thalanil lifted an expressive eyebrow when he realized what this was.

"You are taking me to see more dead?" his father asked.

"I was going to say no, but that's not exactly true. There are some tombs and statues I wish to show you. It's not exactly an arduous journey to get there, but it is rather long," Finn said. "Are you sure you're up to it? You look well, but…"

"I am completely recovered." Thalanil made lightning dance between the fingers of his free hand. "Perfectly as I should be."

And yet it's not enough. He knows that. His very strength is his weakness to his brother.

"If you should get tired or–"

"How far are these things you wish to show me? Must we descend the distance of a mountaintop" Thalanil asked, a slight smile on his face. "Even if that is the case, I have more than enough strength for both of us."

"It's not that far." Finn swallowed. "But I almost lost you yesterday. I know you say you are *fine*–"

"Better than that. Whatever else Rohan is, he has the Aeturnal gift of healing. In some small measure in any case," his father answered, adding the last with a touch of acid.

Finn gritted his teeth. His father must be suffering greatly despite his unruffled exterior. Thalanil had lost his own father, his Empire, his beloved wyvern, and had nearly died himself. Now he was at the mercy of a king whom he distrusted. But there were limits to such allowances for bad temper.

"Rohan is incredibly gifted," Finn reminded him. "And he did not hesitate to give you some of that strength yesterday."

Thalanil merely inclined his head.

The two of them started down the catacomb's stairs companionably, arm in arm, even though they were quiet. Finn knew that his father wanted to talk to him. Perhaps it was about what he'd seen with the undead convict or something else. But Finn had so much to say that his throat felt clogged tight with words. How was he to tell Thalanil everything and have his father listen to it without rejecting it

out of hand? He had no idea.

"I can't imagine what you've gone through in such a short time," Finn admitted.

"I think you can. You lost your mother and your home. You were enslaved after that. I am just a… guest here so it is better for me. And I am not powerless like you were at the time. My brother is not without weaknesses." Thalanil's expression grew grim. "That's why I was glad to have found Christopher's project. It appears to be one suited to going after Marikoth and making him answer for so many crimes."

"It potentially is," Finn agreed. He added with a little touch of jealousy, "You seemed to like Christopher and Miles. I'm glad about that."

His father tightened his hold on Finn's arm. "And yet you do not sound glad. Not completely."

Finn grimaced. "It's nothing."

"It is not nothing if it bothers you."

Finn let his head fall back as he realized his ill-concealed fears were as bright as day to his father. Now he would need to admit them. Would they sound foolish when he did? Or would they expose him in some way?

"I sometimes find it hard to believe that anyone could prefer me over others," Finn finally said.

"Finrael! You are my son! I could love no one more than you," Thalanil assured him. His father's tone was one of complete surprise and mystification.

Finn blushed and lowered his head. "You are too kind to say that."

"I mean it. How could I not?" Thalanil shook his head, continuing to be stunned that Finn's self-worth was so low.

Finn tried to explain, "Though my stepfather was a monster to my stepbrothers and me, I got the worst of it for the longest time while watching them be slightly favored. This–this *uncertainty* is just an artifact from that time. I want you to like and befriend Christopher and Miles. They were my stepfather's victims too. And they are my brothers, after all."

"Brothers?" His father's tone was not dismissive, just questioning. "Few Fae have children and when they do, it is usually just one in their whole eternal lifetimes. It was a miracle that my parents had Marikoth and me. I was unexpected."

"A surprise?" Finn grinned at him.

"A welcome one, but my mother and father had assumed their days of cleaning baby bottoms and burping a crying infant were over. Both of them claimed they loved every minute of it, but…" Thalanil laughed. "Mother was a patient person. Father was a doting one."

"They loved you, maybe not diaper changes."

"I wish…" Thalanil bit his lower lip. "I wish I had been there for some of your milestones. First word. First step. First spell."

"The first spell would have been when I drained Mother's life. I am glad you were not there for that," Finn admitted.

"But if I had been you would not have been alone. You would not have been put under the power of your stepfather. Your life would have been far different." His father's expression was grim. "We've had so little time together."

Finn couldn't disagree. Everything would have been different and better. Except he wouldn't have met Rohan. And he would go through the hells to be with the Rirean king. Besides, looking backwards was pointless. The future was what mattered.

"It's just the beginning, Father. We will have plenty of time going forward," Finn assured him.

"Marikoth will not stop until we are dead or he is, my son," Thalanil answered. "I feel him–like some fat, poisonous spider–spinning his web in Aymar, preparing to come here and destroy us all. A human army, even against Fae mages and not Death Magic, is ineffectual at best. He will roll through here like a crimson tide."

"No, he won't." Finn straightened his shoulders. "He will be stopped."

Accept who you truly are…

"You sound so certain when you say that, Finrael, as if you have some secret knowledge that I do not," Thalanil said. "He seemed to fear you when we were in the Empire. And nothing touched him there so…"

Finn swallowed. "I'm *different* from Marikoth."

"Different?" Thalanil prodded.

"I… I think I'm *meant* to use Death Magic," Finn said carefully, elaborating on what he said before. "Marikoth *can* use it. But it harms him, because I don't think he should be using it."

"But you should be?"

Out of the corner of Finn's eye, the throne loomed. He was looking at that and not ahead of him when he nearly ran into Rohan's parents' tombs. His father veered him around them as Finn gasped out, "These are–"

"Alexandre and Cyrille's tomb. Yes, I recognize their faces in the statuary," his father said and there was a sad look upon his visage. "These were not the statues you wished me to see, I hope? My fondness for them is marred."

"Rohan feels somewhat the same way," Finn explained as they walked past the royal couple. "He can no longer look back upon them with unmitigated love and respect."

Thalanil blinked. "I… Well, that is hard, I would think."

"He would never betray a friend that way," Finn said with a meaningful look at Thalanil.

"Even with things as desperate as they are? I see that Reave Castle blooms but everything beyond is dead," Thalanil said.

"Yes, and that likely explains why they entertained Marikoth's offer. Rirea is in a desperate state. It was even back then," Finn said. "Did they ever ask you to help them?"

"They did and I tried, but the problem was far greater than I could solve. In fact, I could not even tell what the problem was. We had been exporting foodstuffs from the Empire to Rirea since before

my father's time. The harvest here has never been truly sufficient to support the population. I made the cost light for them," Thalanil said proudly.

Finn frowned. "Until you put up the Wall and stopped all contact? You knew Rirea needed the food, but you just stopped sending it?"

Thalanil's nostrils flared. "They betrayed me, Finrael. I would hardly continue to succor my enemies."

"The people of Rirea were never your enemies. You knew that there would be great hardship without those food exports–"

"I knew that the Rireans would have to get food from *elsewhere* and pay far more dearly for it," Thalanil admitted, but his tone was still cold. "That was the *least* result of what their rulers did in betraying me. I could have done far worse, Finrael."

"I suppose you could have. Except without the Wall, Marikoth might have struck at you far sooner," Finn pointed out.

Thalanil's jaw worked and Finn felt guilty for having said that.

They continued their walk. As they got deeper and into the older parts of Reave Castle, his father remarked, "Aeturnal architecture. I can see it in the bones of this place. It could be Aymar if I squint."

"Yes, it becomes much more pronounced farther in where we're going," Finn agreed. "The connection between the lands is strong."

"Of course, it used to be one land. One Empire."

One land. One Empire. One ruler.

Finn licked his lips. "Whatever happens next, we will need Rohan's help to stop Marikoth."

"He is the Heir. I cannot ask him to assist me. It would be like…" Thalanil's lips pressed together in a tight line, unable to finish the sentence.

"You have to ask him, because he is the Heir," Finn contradicted.

His father's eyebrows lifted. "We have other friends outside the Empire–"

"Who? Achuvia? No, Tearlach despises you. Sultane? Bolan? I am betting anyone you knew from those kingdoms is long dead like Queen Artremaya's ancestor." Finn shook his head. "While you put up the Wall relatively recently, it seems that you did not keep up any friendships with the human kingdoms even before that."

"We did not need their assistance." Thalanil's chin lifted.

"We need them now. Even if it is only to give us a place to stay, Father," Finn reminded him.

"If the Rirean King does not want to spare an empty bed–"

"No! Stop this! I have to say something about how you are behaving towards Rohan. Please know that I understand you're in pain and that you're angry. But Rohan–"

"You mean the Aeturnal heir who courts my son without my permission?" Thalanil asked crisply. "Calling him Rohan makes him sound so innocuous."

"He's a good man who saved your life and has treated both of us better than family," Finn

corrected.

"Have I not thanked him for that?" Thalanil asked lightly.

"No, you have not. You've not said one word in thanks for your life, let alone his generosity and his good behavior towards you and me," Finn stated tartly. "Again, I've made allowances, but things can't go on like this, Father. You must let your anger at him go."

"I've not demanded he unhand you, especially as the whole castle glowed when you were engaged in sex acts with him," Thalanil remarked. "So I think I've shown quite a lot of restraint."

"Lovemaking. We were making love." Finn blushed. He'd gotten used to everyone else in the castle knowing when they were loving one another, but Thalanil knowing too was a little unnerving.

"I see."

"Do you?" Finn stopped their forward momentum and turned towards his father. "I *love* him, Father. He loves me. This is not some passing fancy–"

"I should hope not considering you disobeyed me by coming here," Thalanil flared. "Though I am glad you did as otherwise…" His jaw worked. He was clearly picturing what could have happened to Finn if he'd been there when Marikoth had taken over.

Except if I had been, I could have just killed Marikoth. He wouldn't have had Father to hide behind!

But Finn knew it couldn't be that easy. Marikoth could have grabbed anyone that was not in on his plot to take over the Empire and Finn would have stopped attacking.

"I had to," Finn answered. "Marikoth was going to kill Rohan if I didn't come."

"Why do you sound unsure of that?" Thalanil asked, brows furrowing.

Finn grimaced. "He *said* he was going to kill Rohan, but… there's so much to tell you. None of which you will like, but I think it's best I *show* you first."

"I cannot imagine what you will have to show me down here that has anything to do with our present predicament," Thalanil admitted.

"None of us did either. But Marikoth did. I think this was where he realized his purpose. Or supposed purpose beyond his revenge," Finn said.

"You fill me with dread."

Finn did not contradict that feeling.

Finn started leading his father to the tomb again. Unlike in times past, there was plenty of life down here. Students from the university flitted by them, leaving with hands full of precious books, returning with lamps, quills and paper. They stared at Thalanil, but none dared speak to either of them, though a few nodded at Finn.

As they walked down the stairs that led to the tomb, Finn heard Ryleth's voice from down below, "Head Librarian Crosley, I realize that you believe the books to be ordered by subject, but I don't think the subject is what you think it is."

"Priestess Ryleth," Crosley retorted, and the full titles indicated to Finn that things were a little

testy between the two scholars, "I can assure you that we are taking all things into account–"

"Including the tenets of magic?" Ryleth asked.

"Well…" Crosley's voice faded off.

"I thought not. As a human, magic is not something you have any familiarity with, let alone Aeturnal magic, let alone their whole belief system as to where their power came from and to what is connected to it," Ryleth answered. "There's a lot of that here, too, since this room… Well, it explains everything."

Finn's heart rate sped up at her words. Had Ryleth discovered something down here that expanded her understanding of the Aeturnals?

"So our whole system is wrong?" Crosley sounded pained.

"No, not in the least. It's just incomplete. Let me show you," Ryleth said just as he and Thalanil entered the tomb. She caught sight of them both and brightened. "Prince Finrael! King Thalanil! I'm so glad you're both here."

She immediately bowed. Crosley half bowed and then stopped himself. The two of them weren't his rulers and yet he was clearly overwhelmed seeing the two of them together in his new domain. And what a domain it was! His father's expression had gone from one of interest to one of awe.

Finn watched as Thalanil released his arm and took a few steps forwards. He looked at everything without saying a word. Finn made a gesture to Ryleth and the Head Librarian to go back to what they were doing while Thalanil took the tomb all in. Greetings and other discussion could wait. The impact of this room could not.

His father's head tilted back as he took in the soaring ceiling with its massive engraving. His gaze swept over the rows upon rows of shelves of books and scrolls in ancient languages that his father might not actually know as they were written well before his time. The magnificent sarcophagi of the last Aeturnal and his Bonded One were the last things to draw his eye.

Thalanil slowly drifted to them, past the new chairs, tables and plenty of lanterns that had been brought down to give light to the spot. There were scholars filling every table. Gowned university professors were instructing those same scholars in every corner of the room. Thalanil ignored all of them. His eyes were fixed on the Aeturnal and Bonded One that so resembled Finn and Rohan carved on the statues that lay in eternal slumber on the sarcophagi.

His father silently walked up the steps and stood between the two figures. He looked at one face then the other. His expression was hard to read. He still had said nothing. Finn lightly ran a hand over the cold, stone shoulder of Rohan's doppelganger. He drew strength from it as if he had actually touched Rohan.

"I now understand why you thought that this would be worth far more than words," Thalanil said quietly.

"Yes," Finn simply answered. "It looks like–"

"The two of you. I would think it was you if I did not know that you and Rohan still lived,"

Thalanil whispered.

"There's… there's more," Finn said.

"More?" Thalanil repeated as he lightly touched the face that looked so like Finn's.

"Much more," Finn nodded. "This library contains so much information. We're just scratching the surface."

"And that army of monsters above our heads?" Thalanil asked with a slight glance upwards. "Is there anything about them?"

"The Dreadbrood," Finn explained. "Yes, they are a part of this, too. Though we don't know what all of it means or how it all fits in."

"What do *you* think it means?" Thalanil asked, his gaze fixing on Finn.

Finn drew in a deep breath to steady himself. His father was giving him the perfect opening. He had to take it.

"That what's happening to the lands that used to be the Aeturnal Empire now and what happened in the past are connected," Finn said.

"I do not see how." Thalanil cocked his head to the side.

Perhaps if he led his father logically down the path, Thalanil would have to accept the end point more easily. He doubted it, but there was always a chance.

"Things are out of balance, both here, and in the remaining Empire, are they not?" Finn asked.

Thalanil nodded. "Yes, your ability to drain life appears to hardly be a curse, but what the Empire needs to stop the overgrowth. You were always meant to exist. The Empire needs you to exist. To think of all those years we exiled and killed Death Mages while the land was strangled by the very life they were meant to cull." His father shook his head in dismay. "I do not even think my father understood this."

"It's more than my purpose. It's Rohan's purpose too. You see, a Death Mage–or someone who can use Death Magic–is only half of the equation. An Aeturnal and their unique gifts make up the other part. You see, Rohan can redirect the excess life from the Empire to here and wherever else it's needed," Finn explained, his voice warming as he tried to get across how miraculous this was. "I can do so in a limited way, but his ability dwarfs mine. Just like he was able to restore you where I could never have done that."

Thalanil's brows drew together. "If you were to drain the overgrowth and direct it into him, you believe he could restore Rirea?"

Except for the Dreadbrood causing an additional issue.

"In part, but that's only a temporary solution," Finn said, but that his father was considering this as an option was positive. He could tell Thalanil was putting two and two together that his own problems could be solved by the overgrowth being tamed and the excess life being sent to fertilize Rirea's rocky soil.

"What is the permanent one?" Thalanil asked.

Finn grimaced. “I can tell you what Marikoth believes to be true and what appears to be confirmed at least, in part, by some of these books. But we’re learning and we’re still translating and, like most things, it’s not completely crystal clear.”

His father cocked his head. “Tell me what you think now.”

This was it. This was the moment. But his father already distrusted and disliked Rohan because of what his parents had done. What would he do when Finn told him about restoring the Empire under Rohan’s leadership? This could not possibly go well.

Finn opened his mouth to begin when he saw that Ryleth and Crosley were waiting patiently for them at the base of the steps. Finn gestured for the two of them to join him and Thalanil. He needed backup for this. His father might wrongly think that his love for Rohan was making him want to hand over the Empire to him. He hoped his father would not think that of him, but backup was good.

“I will tell you that, but I believe that Ryleth and Crosley can add something to what I’m about to say. Father, this is Head Librarian Crosley of Dawnmore University. Head Librarian Crosley, this is my father, King Thalanil Ravenspar.”

Crosley was doing the half-bowing thing again. His mouth opened and closed rather like a fish. “It is–it is an honor, King Thalanil! I have read so many histories about you and your family! To see you is to see history come to life! I have so much to ask you. If you would, allow me a few questions. Just a few. I would be eternally grateful, and so would the university, and–”

“I will consider doing so, Head Librarian, but at another time,” Thalanil said coolly. “My son has something I need to hear first. Put your scholarly instincts to the side and assist him if you can.”

Crosley really bowed this time, so low that his forehead almost touched the floor. “Oh, thank you, King Thalanil! To speak to someone who was a part of the Irulien Reconstruction and the Timberford Share! I cannot quite believe it!”

Ryleth was chuckling behind her hand. “He’s truly held himself back from asking the millions of questions he has about the past. I’m impressed with his self–restraint. But what can we assist you with?”

Everyone looked expectantly at Finn. He struggled not to pull at the collar of his robes. He considered what he could say. He could start with the tales of the gods and cursing the Aeturnals and sending them packing. He could tell tales of the false Death’s Chosen who had tried to use the Dreadbrood to overthrow the Empire and the Fae. Ryleth could speak of the bond between Aeturnal and Death Mage. He could begin with any of that. But he realized what his father needed to know first was rather simple and stark, but it explained everything.

“The Empire and Rirea are out of balance, because the Empire needs to be restored to its former borders,” Finn stated. “The imbalance will continue until that occurs. Some say the gods cursed the land, but I assume there is some kind of magical connection between the whole of it that was severed when it was broken into parts.”

Thalanil did not move. He was so still, Finn wondered if he was breathing. Ryleth nodded slowly.

Crosley blinked. Rirea was part of this and Finn was just saying that Rirea had to go back and be part of the Empire, so Finn wouldn't expect him to heartily agree.

"That falls in line with the the Aeturnal magic and explains some of the things I've been reading," Ryleth said. "The power stones I showed you back in the Empire? Well, it always perplexed me why they should simply be out in the wild. But I think they're part of a much larger network. King Thalanil, you were able to create the Wall and power it through using some of them, but not all."

"I was," his father said faintly. "Indeed, there are far more out there. In the Empire. In Rirea and…"

"Sultane and Bolan, too? Wherever the Empire extended to?" Ryleth asked.

He nodded. "And the ones I used were close together and seemingly connected. Building the Wall was easy because of that."

"What if they're *all* connected?" Finn suggested, his voice rising with excitement. "And what if their purpose is to balance life across the Empire? The Aeturnals could feed magic into the power stones near Aymar, but it would be felt–"

"All the way to Bolan?" Thalanil murmured.

"Yes, exactly." Finn felt excitement and dread fill him as he realized how this system must have worked. "The overgrowth isn't *unnatural*. It's *necessary* to make all the land live."

"And without Death Magic and Aeturnals to counter the overgrowth and spread it across the Empire…" Ryleth abruptly stopped as she realized what she was saying, or perhaps, realized who she was saying it to: one of the monarchs that had replaced the Aeturnals.

Thalanil was staring at Finn with such intensity.

He's waiting for the other shoe to drop. He knows it's coming. I can't leave him in suspense. But the last part–about an Aeturnal and Bonded One needing to rule–has no basis yet in what we've found.

His father's gaze sharpened, but what he said was not what Finn had expected, "That's why you're positive that Marikoth will come here. Not just for revenge against me and you, but because he *needs* Rohan to make everything work. He needs the Heir of House Aeturnal."

Finn nodded. "Even if the hunger didn't draw him out or revenge made him come here, only Rohan can make the power stone system work. But Rohan will never do that for him willingly."

"No, he won't. But my brother does not care if Rohan is willing or not," Thalanil grimaced. "He will make Rohan join him. No matter what he has to do."

THE PROTECTION OF THE WALL

"King Rohan, I know that you wish to talk and so do I, but I think better when on the move. I was hoping we could go riding," Queen Artremaya said. "I remember the beautiful woods and the river–"

"Queen Artremaya, whatever you remember is gone now," Rohan said as he watched Christopher command the undead to sit in a chair out of the way.

"Then I would see fully what has become of what I remember," she said. "I must understand Sultane's fate."

Rohan thought of so many things he could tell her there and then. That this did not need to be Sultane's fate. Not if they defeated Marikoth. Not if they reunited the Empire. But these things would not give her peace. And she would not believe the necessity of them. Unless she truly saw the ruin that Rirea had become.

"We will ride then," Rohan said. "Let me change and I will meet you in the courtyard."

"I should put on my riding leathers, too." She smiled.

"And bring your sword. The wolves are more aggressive than before," he said.

She nodded.

Rohan gestured for Serxio and Leonid to head with him up to his rooms. The three of them swiftly went up the stairs.

"It's good she wants to see what's coming," Leonid said.

"And unusual," Serxio piped in. "Most leaders want to put their heads in the sand. So long as their lifestyle isn't affected, they are fine to let everyone else suffer."

"She seems like a wise ruler. I only hope she comes to see that the only way to stem the tide of this destruction is to work together," Rohan stated.

"In addition to your riding clothes, you really need to have some outfits planned for dinner tonight and some other royal functions, my king," Serxio pointed out. "The King of Bolan is said to be quite the dandy. Unlike Artremaya who seems more relaxed."

"More sensible," Leonid grunted. "All those frills don't let our king move–"

"Or breathe. And they itch," Rohan groused as he nodded at the Guard by his door and walked

inside.

As soon as they entered the bedroom suite, Leonid caught sight of the bed piled high with wolves. The Guard captain pointed at them and looked meaningfully at Rohan.

"Now *that* is what you get when you feed wolves from the table!" Leonid scolded.

"What on Earth are you talking about?" Serxio asked as he leaned over to see. "Oh, how cute! They're all piled together. A wolf party!"

The tails swept back and forth, but all of the wolves' eyes remained closed. Skye and Tyreon were lying with their heads on the pillows while the pups were tucked all around them.

"How does feeding a wolf from the table cause them to sleep on one's bed?" Rohan protested.

"How do you think we got dogs? They were once mighty wolves who crept close to our fire and who cadged snacks. Then they were content to laze around all day," Leonid paused as Tyreon cracked an eyelid at that remark, "and then, they became addicted to all human comforts. So yes, Rohan, one bit of bacon, a forkful of scrambled eggs, and the mighty hunters become fluffy pillows!"

"Well, that doesn't sound bad! Does it sound bad to you, Rohan?" Serxio asked, looking on delightedly at the pups. "Oh, their little bellies look ripe for petting."

"You do that and they'll rip your arm off," Leonid warned.

Rohan went to the entrance to his closet and asked, "Hold on a moment, Leonid. You cannot have it both ways. Lazy dogs or fierce wolves?"

"We're still at a state where they can go live in the wild. Next generation, though, and it will be all over." Leonid nodded sagely.

Rohan shook his head. "Whatever else Tyreon, Skye and their pups are, they are magical. You can rub their bellies, Serxio. They'll let you know if they don't want it. *Without* ripping your arm off."

Serxio, who had clutched his hands against his chest, slowly reached forward and rubbed a pup's belly. The pup let out a sleepy sigh and stretched its paws up and out, allowing Serxio to pet every single inch of its underside.

"Oh, they are *soft*! So soft! I wish I had a coat made of–I didn't mean that, Tyreon!" Serxio squeaked as the big white wolf lifted his head to glare at Serxio. "I would never hurt your babies or you!" With Tyreon still glaring at him, Serxio added, "Not that I could!" Tyreon laid back down again.

"Serxio, could you help me pick what to wear for dinner while I pull on my armor?" Rohan asked, sick of the endeavor already.

Serxio perked up again and hustled towards the closet. "Absolutely! And if you wanted, I could arrange your outfits for the whole week! I think three costume changes a day would be appropriate, don't you?"

"Gods help you if you do that. I will be the one ripping your arm off," Rohan glared at the foppish young lord just as Tyreon had.

"My king, I–"

"Rohan," Marikoth's voice cut through their conversation.

All three men stared at one another in various degrees of open-mouthed shock. Rohan reached, and somehow, he wasn't sure how he did it, Lightbringer flew across the room to his hand. It glowed with golden fire.

"Where are you, you foul wretch?" Leonid hissed as he pulled his sword from its scabbard.

"We're not afraid of you!" Serxio cried as he took out his daggers. His hands were trembling slightly but he firmed them.

Rohan spun around to look for the Death Mage, but there was no sign of him anywhere. Then he saw the flickering light of the Luminus in the other room.

The Luminus is paired with the one in Aymar!

He stalked out of his bedroom with Serxio and Leonid at his heels. In the Luminus was Marikoth. He was smiling. His face was whiter than Rohan had remembered even from their last encounter. There looked to be no color in it except for his eyes and lips which were ruby red.

"There you are! Figured it out finally, eh?" Marikoth laughed. "Were you wishing I was there with you? I see you were. Look at your *sword*! All out and blazing for me."

Rohan's eyes narrowed. He heard the double entendre in Marikoth's words and it disgusted him. "What do you want, Marikoth?

"Well, I was just looking at the prior communications that are stored on this Luminus. I was curious about my brother's conversations, but there are sadly few of them that weren't with that poor, little Maeve Ashton." Marikoth made a face. "But *then* I came upon your conversations with Finrael! A *specific* one in fact." Marikoth's eyes glittered. "One where you discussed exactly what you would do if Finrael was in your bedroom–"

"ENOUGH!" Rohan roared, realizing very well which conversation that Marikoth meant. "I will not discuss that with you!"

"But I do need to know. For my understanding is that we exchange far more energy during sex," Marikoth said with a tittering laugh. "So I wanted to understand just how good a lover you are. For a young man, you're not bad. But I'll have plenty to teach you, don't worry!"

Rohan's stomach roiled. "I will never touch you, Marikoth, unless it is with Lightbringer's blade cutting through your treacherous neck!"

Marikoth laughed again. "Promises. Promises! But words are cheap."

"Says the Fae that is hiding on the other end of a magical device rather than in the room of his enemies," Leonid growled.

"I could drain you from here, but your mortal life is like a candle flame. It will be over before it begins!" Marikoth laughed. "It's so interesting and sadly predictable that you think I am your enemy."

"Who else would it be?" Serxio scoffed.

Marikoth leaned closer to the Luminus' surface. Rohan resisted the urge to try and reach out to strangle the Death Mage. His hands would find only glass anyways.

"You claim to find the idea of having sex with me so objectionable, Rohan, but considering what

you've been letting into your bed, I'm quite offended," Marikoth taunted.

"You can't seriously be suggesting that *Finn* is our enemy?" Serxio laughed shrilly.

"He's gone mad completely, my king," Leonid snorted.

"He does look so pretty and innocent on the outside, but I wager there have been a few instances when you've wondered about him," Marikoth said, his smile growing like a slash across his face. "When he's lost his temper."

Rohan involuntarily remembered the way the sky had gone black and the lightning had crackled through it. But, then again, Thalanil controlled the storms too.

"Has he spoken about the Dreadbrood?" Marikoth asked.

Rohan said nothing.

"Or being Death's Chosen?" Marikoth continued.

"Are you jealous, Marikoth? Wouldn't you like to be favored by a god?" Rohan asked.

"By the God of Death?" Marikoth chuckled. His gaze went unfocused then. "Once upon a time, I did try to reach that mad force of nature. My magic, my power, everything about me should have made me its favorite, but then…" Marikoth suddenly seemed to remember who he was speaking to and shook his head. "Well, I realized that I was the mad one for wanting that. Death wants only one thing. To destroy life. And what is the Empire? What are Fae? If not everlasting life." He touched the center of his chest. "Death wants to destroy the Fae and anyone who gets in its way."

"Isn't that what you want?" Leonid sneered.

"I did. As I said, for a time. But then I realized I was truly not cursed, but meant for greater things than revenge," Marikoth answered. He stared at Rohan with an intensity that was completely unsettling. "We are destined to shake the pillars of the heavens, Rohan. Together, we can restore the Empire and far more than that. You know I'm right."

"I do believe you in part," Rohan answered. "But Finn is the one I am destined–and who I want–to change this world for."

"Finn is the Prince of Death, Rohan," Marikoth said with a sad shake of his head as if he truly pitied this state of affairs. "If he is allowed to continue, he will bring about the end for the Empire, the Fae, humanity, all of it that was started so long ago when the Aeturnals were run off."

"I don't believe you," Rohan said. "You lie as easily as you breathe."

"I have never once lied, Rohan. I am an open book. But Finn? He hides things. He has secrets. Even from you," Marikoth said.

"If he holds anything back it is only because he does not understand it himself yet. He would never hurt me. He wouldn't even hurt you, Marikoth, if you would stop this madness," Rohan told him. "He would love you. He would wish to try and heal you. Perhaps there's a way."

"You healed Thalanil, didn't you?" Marikoth was not even blinking.

"He is even stronger than he was before," Rohan lifted his head as he said this. "I can heal you. If I can be taught to use my powers fully–"

"The only healing I need is for us to bond and to set things right," Marikoth interrupted smoothly.

"And what would you do if I offered to join you?" Rohan asked, his stomach twisting at the very thought.

"Restore the Empire–"

"I know that. *How*? How would you restore it? What would you say to the Queen of Sultane and the King of Bolan to get them to cede their territories back to us?" Rohan asked.

"Say?" Marikoth laughed as if this were the funniest thing he'd ever heard. "Why would I *speak* to them? I would kill them. And their pathetic nobles and anyone else that would object. That would be a small number after they saw what happened to the others."

"And *that* is why I will not join you," Rohan said.

"Oh, I see! You haven't considered deposing them yourself?" Marikoth scowled at him. "You are not such a child as to think that they'll just do what's right–"

"I have, but it is *not* my first play. It is the last thing I would do. If I had no other choice," Rohan said.

"No other choice," Marikoth said each of those words with a nod of his head after them. "Yes, I knew it would come to this. Because it *always* does. That's why I normally don't bother with anything else. But I wanted it to be different between us, Rohan. We have so much we must do together and I would have us be friends. But if not friends then… Let me show you something."

"There is nothing you can–"

"No, no, this you'll want to see. Go out onto your balcony and look towards the Empire," Marikoth said. "I'll wait."

"Just tell me–"

"No, I must *show* you. Show don't tell. It's best," Marikoth said.

"You go, my king. We'll stay here and keep an eye on him," Leonid said.

Rohan was not certain if there was anything that Marikoth could do through the Luminus other than look and talk at them. He turned and left the room, heading for the balcony. He went outside and stood at the railing. Everything looked as it should, even with Silver Soul patrolling the skies.

"Are you there yet?" he heard Marikoth call.

"I am!" Rohan shouted over his shoulder.

"Watch carefully!" Marikoth laughed.

Rohan had no idea what Marikoth wanted him to see. It would, undoubtedly, be something horrible, but he was used to that so he prepared himself. Except he wasn't ready for it when it came. The Wall that had been there almost all of his life flickered out of existence. It did not come back even as Rohan waited and waited and waited. Feeling as if he was in a dream, Rohan turned and headed back to the Luminus. Marikoth was smiling at him like a beautiful skeleton.

"The Wall was for my brother's protection to keep me out," Marikoth said. "But it also protected *you*, Rohan, and your people from what it kept *in*. The creatures here are all maddened after being

without a Death Mage and Aeturnal to tend to them for so long." Marikoth's smile grew. "They long to stretch their legs and now, without the Wall, they can do so by walking or running into Rirea. The monsters are coming, Rohan. They're coming in wave after wave."

In the distance, Rohan heard howls and roars and sounds of battle. Silver Soul saw the intruders.

Rohan felt numb. "You cannot do this. You will kill countless innocents–"

"You know me, Rohan," Marikoth chuckled. "I don't care about innocents. But you do."

"What do you want?" Rohan asked.

"You already know," Marikoth said almost gently. "Surrender to me. Give yourself over and I'll save those innocents for you. Not Finrael or Thalanil. But your people. The ones you supposedly serve. You have no other choice."

Rohan just stared at the Death Mage with hate in his eyes.

"But you don't have to answer my proposal now," Marikoth said. "I'm prepared to wait until your conscience is covered in an ocean of innocent blood. The question is: are you?"

The Story Continues in Cinders & Ashes Book 6!

THANK you so much for reading Cinders & Ashes 5. I sincerely hope you enjoyed it! This story is going to be longer than I thought and I'm grateful you are along for the ride.

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Thank you again for your support!

X. Aratare/Raythe